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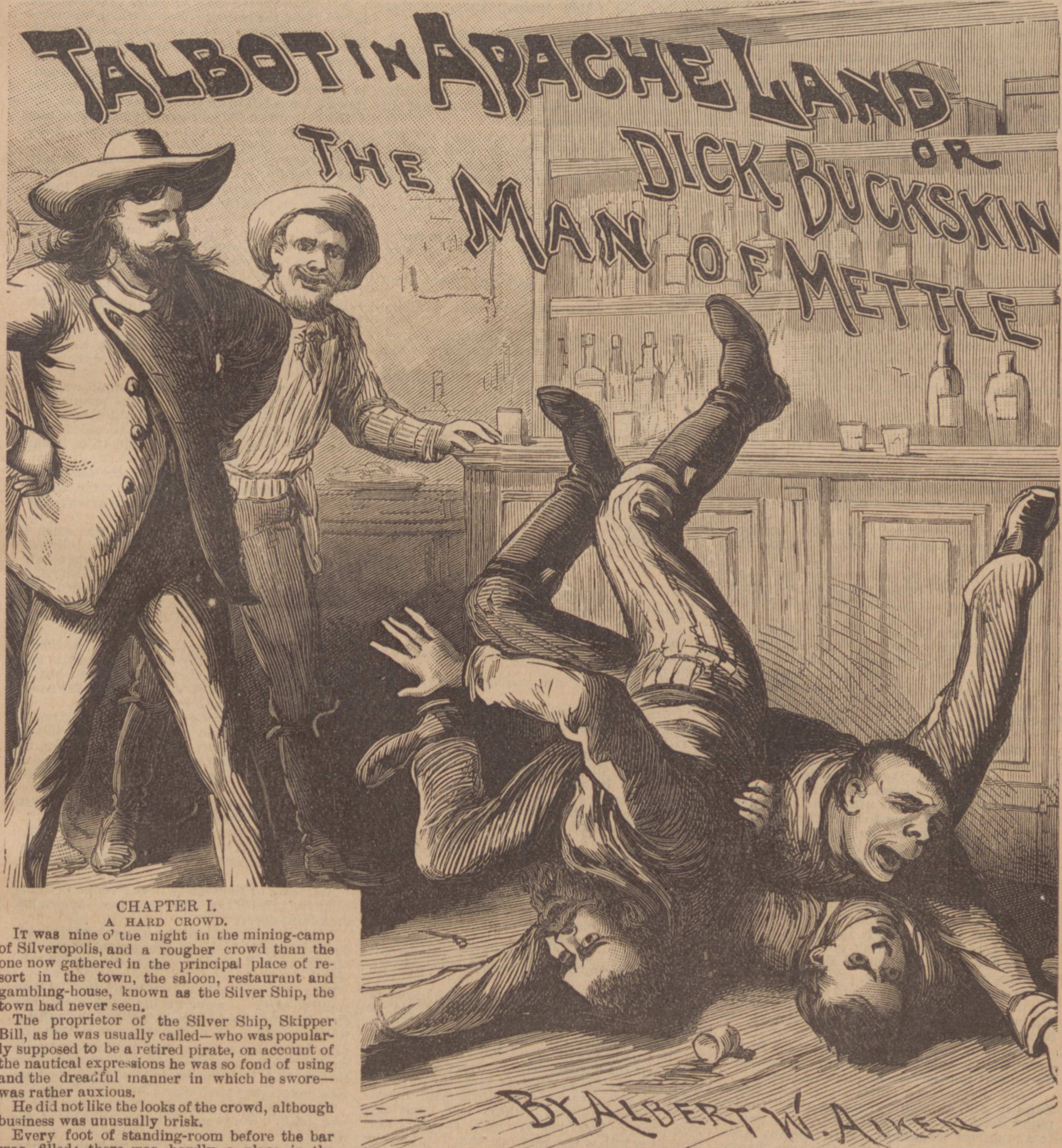
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CHAPTER I. A HARD CROWD.

It was nine o' the night in the mining-camp of Silveropolis, and a rougher crowd than the one now gathered in the principal place of resort in the town, the saloon, restaurant and gambling-house, known as the Silver Ship, the town had never seen.

The proprietor of the Silver Ship, Skipper Bill, as he was usually called—who was popularly supposed to be a retired pirate, on account of the nautical expressions he was so fond of using and the dreadful manner in which he swore—was rather anxious.

He did not like the looks of the crowd, although business was unusually brisk.

Every foot of standing-room before the bar was filled; there was hardly a place in the restaurant which was not occupied, and the

"IF THERE IS ANY MORE OF THE WHIP-SAW GANG, BRING THEM ON!" CRIED BUCKSKIN.

gaming-tables were surrounded by an eager crowd of players.

But, for all that, Skipper Bill was uneasy; possibly, as he professed to be an old salt, there was "something in the air" which warned him of a coming storm.

There was a gang in the place whose room he would much rather have had than their company, although they were spending money freely.

Silveropolis, like all other mining-camps, was cursed by the presence of two or three gangs, who, when they went on the war-path, were apt to "make Rome bowl."

And this particular gang which, on the night of which we write, had deigned to "honor" the Silver Ship with their presence, bore the reputation of being the hardest crowd in the district.

There were only three in the party, but they were three big "galoots," each one of whom looked able to handle with ease any two common men.

This trio was known as the Whip-Saw Gang—so named from the fact that they were partners in a mine located a mile or so northeast of the camp, and which was known as the Whip-Saw Claim.

It was good property, and the three were reported to be making big money out of it; but, whatever their gains, great or little, they were squandered as fast as acquired, and when the partners became excited with liquor they were dangerous men to "buck" against.

A big, yellow-haired, blonde-bearded giant known as Pete Eelskin—because he always carried a dried eelskin in his pocket as a preventive against rheumatism—was the leader of these triple terrors. Next came Parson Smith, so called because he had a smooth face and a considerable command of language, evidently being an educated man. The last was Little Mike, thus termed in the spirit of contradiction, as he was about six feet high, rather slender in build, and with a face which, with its shock of hair, coarse features and scrubby beard, strongly resembled a baboon's.

When these men entered the saloon they were in liquor and evidently ripe for mischief.

"Hyer we ar', the king pins of the ole Whip-Saw!" Eelskin exclaimed. "We are chiefs, every man of us, able to whip our weight in wild-cats, an' we don't take a back seat for any cuss w'ot walks on top of this hyer footstool!"

"Skipper Bill, you old land-pirate, set out yer benzine, an' ef the liquor ain't good enuff to burn a hole through a copper kittle, cuss me ef we don't clean out yer hull shebang!"

The landlord of the Silver Ship, noted for his violent temper, as a rule never took any "sass" from his customers. It was his boast, indeed, that, if a man came into his place wanting a fight, he could be accommodated, off hand.

To aid him in keeping order, Bill had a "bouncer," as his assistant was termed; a big Irishman, named Pat Mulligan, whose duty it was to bounce—that is, throw out of the door—any visitor who evinced a disposition to make trouble.

But, on this occasion, neither the landlord nor his bouncer had any wish to tackle the Whip-Saw Gang.

"Certainly, Pete, certainly! Thar ain't any lickin' in the house any too good for crafts that carry as much sail as you do," the landlord protested.

"Oh, don't try the soft sawder dodge onto us!" Pete Eelskin retorted. "You know blamed well that you ain't glad to see us, an' that if you dared, you an' yer bouncer would h'ist us out in a brace of shakes, an' I'll give you a five-dollar slug ef you will try it on! We ain't had a funeral in the camp now for more'n a week, an' I reckon me an' my pards hyer could fix you an' yer bouncer in shape for plantin' inside of two minutes, an' we wouldn't have to more than half try, either!" the "terror" exclaimed.

The landlord and his assistant smiled—a sickly kind of smile, as it was afterward described. He very well knew, that to eject the intruders, would be a hard fight, and, in the struggle, considerable damage would be done to his property, even if he and the bouncer did not suffer personally in the affair.

"You will have yer joke, I see, Pete," the landlord remarked. "Splice my main-booms! if I don't like a man who has some humor inter him. What will you take? Is it whisky?"

"Skipper Bill, you hain't got half as much sand as I reckoned you had!" Eelskin averred, in a disgusted sort of way. "If any man had sed to me w'ot I have jest said to you, you kin bet all yer ducats that I would have clinched him so quick that he would have thought he had run up ag'in' a cyclone."

"Ah, Pete, you are the biggest chief in this camp, an' thar ain't any discount on that, blow me tight if thar is!" the landlord protested.

"An' thar's three chiefs hyer, too, Mister Skipper Bill, an' don't you forget it!" the big fellow declared. "We ar' the three bad men of this camp, an' we stand ready to face any three, or any six, or any nine men in this hyer shanty, right ef the reel!"

The miners looked at each other, but none moved to accept the bold defiance.

"Hyer's the lickin', boys," interposed the landlord, cheerfully. "An' if you don't say it is as good bug-juice as ever warmed the cockles of a man's heart, I don't want a cent, blast my tarry top-lights!"

"If it is bad benzine, durn me if I don't blast yer tarry top-lights!" Pete Eelskin remarked.

There was plenty of room at the bar now, for during this conversation, those in front of the counter had quietly retired.

Among those present in the room were two persons who sat at one of the tables, a short distance from the bar.

One was an old man, weather-beaten and gray, with a thin, hatchet-like face, lit up by the keenest of keen gray eyes.

He was dressed in the prairie garb of buckskin, and was evidently an old mountain-man.

His companion was a stripling, about seventeen or eighteen years old, below the medium hight, but well-formed and muscular; his face was dark, rather inclined to be womanish, although there were strong lines about the mouth, and the firm-set chin seemed to show a resolute will. He was apparently a half-breed, for no other race than the wild Indian could have given him such a pair of black eyes.

Like his companion, he wore a complete buckskin suit.

The old man had been drinking freely, despite the efforts of his companion to restrain him, but at last had been persuaded to sit down and eat something, but the frugal repast being finished, the old fellow insisted upon another drink.

"My mouth is as dry as an ash-heap!" he announced, "and it has been so ever since I struck this town. Reckon there must a good deal of alkali 'round hyer."

"I would not go to the bar now—not while those ruffians are there; you may get in trouble," the youth protested.

"Oh, bosh! You mustn't be afeard 'cos you hear a leetle big talk!" the old man replied. "Come on and have a drink," and he rose. The youth, too, got up, a weary expression upon his face.

"I don't care for anything, and if you are wise you will not drink any more."

With uncertain steps the old mountain tramp approached the bar, the youth following slowly.

The three big fellows had just filled their glasses.

"Excuse me, gentlemen," he said, reaching for the bottle.

"Not by a durned sight!" Eelskin roared, seizing the bottle. "No sich bummer as you kin ring in onto this hyer party!"

"I ain't no bummer!" protested the old man with indignation; "I reckon if you ask anybody up along the upper Rio Grande 'bout old Mart Kruger, who used to be Kit Carson's side pardner, they will tell you I am the clear white article, and no mistake!"

"Oh, gammon! You hain't got no money to pay for yer drink!"

"Ain't I, hey? Jest look at this, good for fifty drinks, will you?" and the old man flourished a fifty-dollar note.

Pete Eelskin promptly snatched it out of his hand.

CHAPTER II.

AN ASTOUNDING FEAT.

ALL within the room stared in amazement. Fifty-dollar bills were not common in the mining-camp of Silveropolis; and, too, no one would have supposed the old chap could have so much money.

"Hold on! W'ot are you 'bout?" yelled the old tramp.

"Durn me if it ain't the very identical bill!" Pete Eelskin declared, pretending to examine it critically.

"W'ot do you mean?"

"Good for fifty ducats—the very bill—hey, boys!" And he turned to his gang, who had fallen a little back from the bar.

"Give me back my money! Do you mean to rob me?" demanded the old mountaineer.

"Your money? Ho, ho, ho! Wa-al, now, of all the cheek I ever run up against!" the ruffian retorted.

"W'ot do you mean?" cried the veteran, placing his hand on the butt of one of his revolvers belted to his waist, but the three pards were on the lookout for just such a movement and Little Mike, who was noted for being remarkably quick on the "draw," raised his revolver half out of its sheath, cocking it as he did so with the warning:

"Don't ye be afther drawin' yer pop-guns, or it is in a difficulty ye'll find yerself, do ye mind?"

"Now, don't you try any nonsense, stranger, for it won't work!" Pete Eelskin exclaimed. "We are the hardest crowd to tackle that you ever run across, an' if you want to go in for blood we will give you all you want, an' I reckon we won't half-try, either. But, 'bout this shin-plaster: I am onto yer leetle rack t, I am. This hyer bill is the very one that I lost on the trail between our mine up the crick an' this hyer town, day afore yesterday; ain't that so, pards?"

The other two, as in duty bound, nodded assent.

"No sich thing!" the old man shouted, greatly excited. "I only struck this hyer camp to-night, an' I brought the bill in with me!"

"I can bear witness to that," the youth said, in a tone which sounded singularly musical.

"Of course you will bear witness to it—sw'ar to it, I have no doubt," Eelskin rejoined, in sarcastic contempt.

By this time the attention of every one in the room was attracted to the altercation, but so great was the terror the three had inspired that none of the lookers-on had any disposition to interfere.

Among those in the saloon was one who, while not apparently paying much attention to the discussion, yet was deeply interested in it.

He was now standing at the further end of the bar, and there was a clear space between where he stood and Pete Eelskin.

He was a notable-looking person—about the medium hight, and as he wore a tight-fitting buckskin suit, the breeches a cross between the fringed leggings of the red-skin and a pair of tightly-cut pantaloons, his magnificent muscular proportions were fully revealed.

He was not what could be called a big man, but his build would have delighted the heart of that old-time English sport, Captain Barclay, whose declaration that a hundred-and-fifty-pound man was big enough to whip the world has now become a proverb.

A cream-colored flannel shirt protected his broad chest, the rolling collar of which was carelessly turned down over his buckskin coat, which was cut after the fashion of an English shooting-jacket.

Upon his head he wore a cream-colored, broad-brimmed felt hat, and from under the hat his flowing locks fell in ringlets to his shoulders.

His hair was a dark-brown, almost black, and a full, short beard of crispy, curling hair of the same hue covered his chin.

The face of this peculiarly-attired stranger was a manly, resolute one, very dark in hue, as though he had been much exposed to the elements, or, possibly, he had Indian blood in his veins.

Around his waist a broad leather belt was strapped, which supported two holsters containing a pair of revolvers, navy size, and a sheath which held a ten-inch bowie knife.

This individual had never before been seen in Silveropolis, and had made his appearance some five minutes before.

His appearance had excited no particular comment, though, for all attention was now riveted upon the Whip Saw Pard and their victim.

When Eelskin declared that the bill was one he had lost, the right hand of this stranger in buckskin stole quietly to the handle of the ten-inch bowie and drew it from its sheath, his position preventing the movement from being seen.

"Yes, sir, I will sw'ar to it!" the old mountain-man asserted. "The bill is mine, and I didn't strike this hyer camp until arter night-fall."

"Do you mean to say that I lie, then, when I say that this hyer is the very identical bill w'ot I lost on the road from the crick, where my mine is?" Pete demanded, with an ugly scowl.

The old man well enough comprehended that the ruffian was bent upon a fight, but he did not relish being drawn into a difficulty of any sort.

"No, I ain't a-saying that you lie," he therefore replied. "It is only a mistake, that is all. I reckon you *think* the bill is yourn, but it ain't, 'cos I brought it with me into the town and I have had it for a long time."

"Oh, that's a very good story to tell, but I know better!" Eelskin persisted. "This bill is mine, an' thar's no two ways 'bout that; but, to show you, an' all the crowd, jest w'ot kind of a white man I am, I am going to blow this hull fifty ducats in for drinks, an' every man in the room is welcome to waltz up to the bar an' h'ist all the lickin' he likes, an' don't you forget it!"

"That is the kind of talk I like to hear!" the Parson declared. "It does me proud to see my pard throw himself in such first-class, Eastern style!"

And some of the thirsty in the room, delighted at the prospect of obtaining free drinks, set up a faint cheer.

"But, I say, pard, this hyer is an awful rough deal on me!" old Mart Kruger objected. "I ain't rich enuff to blow in fifty chucks for benzine!"

"Don't you trouble yerself 'bout that!" Pete replied, with a wave of his right hand, the thumb and finger of which clutched the bill by the end, and he extended his arm so that the note hung down like a flag pendent from its staff. "Take a good long look at this hyer beauty, 'cos I reckon it will be a mighty long time before you see it again!"

The old pilgrim gave a sort of a gasp, for it was plain he was going to be robbed of his money.

Just then there was a bright flash as something whizzed through the air.

It was the buckskin stranger's bowie, thrown

with so true an aim that it took the dollar bill out of Eelskin's extended hand, and, passing through its center, pinned it against the wooden wall, into which the blade entered and stuck, quivering!

A marvelous performance, truly, and, coming so unexpectedly, took all by surprise.

CHAPTER III.

A LIVELY TIME.

THE audacity of the act almost took away the breath of the leader of the Whip-Saw trio and his pards.

They could only stare at the bill pinned to the wall by the knife; then, seeming to realize it all, they simultaneously clapped their hands upon the butts of their revolvers, and glared at the stranger.

But, he was ready.

The moment the knife went flying through the air, he whipped out a revolver and placed it upon the counter, upon which he leaned, his hand resting upon the butt of the weapon.

"Go slow, bullies!" was the peremptory warning; "go slow or I will make it warm for you!"

All stared in amazement. Never had the miners seen the Whip Saw Brotherhood thus defied, and that a stranger, evidently without friends to back him, should thus act, excited profound astonishment.

The three ruffians hesitated; something about this stranger caused them to be wary of him.

"W'ot in blazes do you mean by this interference?" finally uttered Pete Eelskin.

"Only trying to reduce some of the frills you have been indulging in!" the stranger replied, carelessly.

"You had better be keeful w'ot you are up to!" the bully exclaimed, angrily. "Better men than you have been killed for jest sich foolishness."

"Oh, my life is insured, so I'm all right!" the other retorted. "If I should happen to get wiped out in any little skirmish of this kind, I should have the satisfaction of beating the insurance company," at which retort a broad grin appeared on the face of nearly every man in the saloon.

"Wa-al, cuss me ef you ain't the cheekiest galoot I have run across for a dog's age!" Pete declared. "You have got plenty of sand, I reckon, an' ef it wasn't for that, I'd lay you out in no time; but I like a man with sand, an' so I ain't a-going to jump on you with both feet without warning."

"Oh, bosh!" the other returned, contemptuously. "You are the biggest blowhard I have seen for a long time, and I reckon you would show the white feather every time if you hadn't a gang at your back. Such scoundrels as you are the disgrace of mining-camps. You have jumped on this old man just because he is a stranger, and you know that he hasn't friends in town to help him. That bill is no more yours than it is mine, and all I regret is that I did not drive my knife through one of your long ears and pin you to the wall instead of the bill, you big gorilla!"

Great was the astonishment of the crowd as they listened to this denunciation; and as for the three pards, their wrath was unbounded. Never had the gang been thus scorned and defied.

Notwithstanding their rage, they had sense enough not to go into the fight as long as their daring and expert adversary possessed the advantage.

"It's a lie!" Pete howled. "The Whip-Saw Pards ar' fighting men and don't you forget it! We don't take no back-talk from anybody, an' if you hadn't got the deadwood on us you wouldn't dar' to be so free with your chin-music, you buckskin galoot!"

"You hit it right, that time;—that is my name, Buckskin—Dick Buckskin, and you will discover that I am a hummer from Hummer-ville."

"You jest give me a fair show an' I will take all the hum out of you!" Eelskin retorted, savagely.

"Well, now, I am just the man to accommodate you!" and Buckskin smiled serenely.

We will follow the Western fashion in this case, and give the handsome stranger the name he claimed. In the mining regions it is considered the height of impoliteness to express any doubts in regard to a man's "handle;" and, although the reader, who has followed the fortunes of a certain personage, whose career we have traced from the time he left the city of New York, a stripling lad, undoubtedly has a suspicion that this stranger in buckskin was not what he appeared to be, and that he had allowed hair and beard to grow so as to disguise his identity.

"Jest you try it on, an' ef we don't skin you alive, then we ain't the men we think we air!" Eelskin rejoined.

"Stranger, we are man-eaters!" Parson Smith now added, "and if we get a good chance at a man about your size you might as well make your will and say your prayers, for you will be gobbled so quickly that you will think you ar' sent through by telegraph!"

"Be afther giving me wan chance at yees, an' it's not two bites that I will be makin', bad 'cess to ye!" Little Mike cried, brandishing his huge fists.

"You three r're the biggest gas-bags I ever struck!" and Buckskin looked his contempt. "Bah, you are squaws fit only to skin coyotes! I will whip the three of you, single-handed!"

This declaration excited new surprise, and the listeners looked at each other as much as to ask if this was all in earnest, or only bravado.

"W'ot, fight the three of us?" Pete asked, excitedly.

"That is what I said, bub!"

"Oh, go 'long! You will be chewed up in no time! Any one of us is a match for you. Why, with our fists alone we could hammer the life out of you!"

"Stranger, haven't you shot off your mouth a little more than you intended?" Parson Smith asked. "You may be a good man—I don't doubt that you are, or else you never would have cared to hop into this fuss, but, when you talk about standing up against us, one against three acknowledged chiefs, why, you simply talk nonsense! It would be a picnic for us and we would lay you out in no time, either with fists or weapons!"

"Begob! ye wouldn't be afther lasting wan minit!" Little Mike asserted.

"I will go you as soon as you like," Buckskin replied; "and since you are so sure that you three squaws can lay me out, we will make a fist fight so you will have the chance to hammer me all you like."

The inmates of the saloon could not believe that this one man would dare to contend with three such bruisers as the Whip-Saw Pards.

"That ain't fair!" the old mountaineer now protested. "It is my fight, and I ought for to be allowed to have a hand into it, though I will admit that I ain't no great shakes in a fist fight."

"Oh, no; it is my funeral!" Dick Buckskin assured. "All I ask is fair play; no weapons, but fists alone. Will you gentlemen see that no man pulls a weapon?"

"We will—we will!" yelled a dozen voices, and out came the six-shooters.

"You kin bet your life you ar' goin' to git the squarest kind of a show!" an old, gray-bearded citizen declared, one of the solid men of the town, and he gave emphasis to his words by flourishing a big revolver.

"Yes, yes; a square deal, you bet!" cried many voices, in a sort of chorus.

"Come on then, for I'm your man!" exclaimed the buckskinned stranger, stepping into the open space in front of the bar, which was fully twenty feet square, while the men who had been standing near were hustled back so as to give the fighters a clear field—the old mountain-man and the youth retreating with the rest.

"Time!" called out the landlord, who, as an old rounder, understood how an affair of this kind should be conducted.

Little Mike, possessed of the belief that he was the boss bruiser of the town, made haste to rush at the stranger so as to anticipate his comrades and win all the glory; but his rush was abruptly stopped by an iron-like fist which caught Michael between the eyes and knocked him over with as much celerity as though a cannon-ball had struck him.

Eelskin had hastened to follow Mike's lead, but had veered around a little to the right so as to get a side crack at the foe, but as he saw Little Mike go down with a cry of rage he made a terrible direct stroke at Buckskin which that gentleman deftly dodged, and, dropping under Pete's arm, turned with wonderful quickness and dealt that "chief" a tap under the ear which made the bully reel and tumble as though stricken with an attack of apoplexy.

The Parson was close behind Eelskin, and he, too, essayed to crush the nimble man in buckskin with a mighty blow, but the other dodged his stroke as easily as he had escaped Pete Eelskin's.

Smith, therefore, passed him in his rush, and then, as he tried to turn, Dick Buckskin landed a terrific right-hander near the heart. With a gasp the Parson threw up his hands and over he went, falling with all his weight full on Eelskin, who was just rising, dazed and bewildered.

Down went the two in a heap, the leader of the gang almost crushed by the weight of his pard.

By this time Little Mike was on his feet, in a measure recovered from the effects of the blow he had received, and with him it was the old joke over again. He was not so handsome as he was before he got the blow, but he knew more.

But, expecting to catch Dick unawares, he made a dash for him, and this time the agile stranger did not attempt to either dodge or return the blow; he simply dropped upon his hands and knees right in Little Mike's path, and the result was that the Irishman, unable to stop his headway, tumbled completely over his enemy, and landed on the prostrate forms of his pards, crushing them to the floor, from whence they had begun to rise, in the most violent manner.

"If there is any more of the Whip-Saw Gang,

bring them on!" cried Buckskin, as he now rose in triumph.

This settled Parson Smith, for his head came to the floor with such violence that all the sense was knocked out of him.

Eelskin was but little better off, for he was so banged and blown as to be entirely unable to come to time.

Michael, however, had not got enough, apparently, for he "pulled himself together" as well as he was able, and rushed at his foe, but with every caution.

It availed him nothing, though, for within a half-minute his antagonist got in a left-hander which toppled the belligerent Mike to the floor again, with a crash.

Three times he came up and three times he was promptly knocked down without being afforded a chance to get in a blow.

After the third downfall, as he lay bruised and breathless upon the floor, he cried:

"Will ye be afther knocking me down if I git up?" he asked.

"You can bet your bottom dollar I will!" Buckskin replied, now thoroughly warmed up by the contest.

"Then, bedad, I'll lay here till ye're gone!" the Irishman announced.

There was a roar at this speech, in which the victor joined.

"Gentlemen, I reckon the picnic is over," he said.

CHAPTER IV.

THE TREASURE HOUSE IN APACHE-LAND.

DICK BUCKSKIN was correct; the fight was over.

The Whip-Saw Pards were thrashed, and soundly, too, by the single man—as marvelous a feat as Silveropolis had ever witnessed.

"To the victor belong the spoils, so I reckon I will have the handling of this fifty-dollar note," the conqueror remarked. And, as he spoke, he took the bowie-knife and the bank-note from the wall.

Replacing the knife in his sheath he handed the bill to the old mountain-man.

"And now, pard, if you don't mind, I will give you a bit of advice," the sportsman said. "Don't pull a fifty-dollar note out again in a bar-room among strangers, and you will not be so apt to get into trouble."

"That's good advice, an' I'll be gol-durned if I don't foller it hyerafter," the old tramp remarked. "I don't know how in thunder I came to make so bad a break, but I reckon the fire-water that I have been h'isting kinder got into my head and muddled me up."

"I should not be surprised."

By this time the three toughs had got on their feet again, assisted by those of the miners who were anxious to curry favor with the bullies.

The trio made no attempt to molest the man who had conquered them, only casting glances of hatred toward him, and then retreated to the other end of the room, where washing conveniences were provided.

Dick Buckskin had waited to see what the fellows would do, as he had an idea they might have recourse to their weapons, but, for the present, they were satisfied, and were not at all in the mood for any more fighting.

"Well, so long, pards! I will see you again, some time," the hero of the hour remarked, moving toward the door.

"Hold on! Thunderation! Have a drink with me!" the old mountain-man pleaded.

"Yes, hol' on! Thar's a dozen on us hyer w'ot will be proud to have a bowl with you!" the gray-haired miner added.

"Gentlemen, I feel truly honored by the compliment, but you really must excuse me. Some other time I will be happy to accept your hospitality," and, with a polite bow, Dick Buckskin went forth into the night.

"Father, that man would be invaluable to us in our expedition!" the youth whispered in the ear of the old mountain-man.

"That is so, sure as ye'r born!" That is a mighty big idee of yours! We will go ask him and see if we can't make a trade," and the two hastened out after the stranger.

Under the bright moon all objects were almost as visible as by day; so it was an easy matter for the pair to discover which way the champion had gone.

He was sauntering carelessly down the street, and just as the old pilgrim and the young one came out of the saloon, he stopped to light a cigar.

This gave the two a chance to overtake him.

"Say, stranger, kin I speak a word with you?" Kruger asked, as he came up.

"Certainly; I am at your service."

"Are you going anywhar in particular?"

"No; I have just struck the town, and I hav'n't decided where I shall put up for the night, although I shall, probably, patronize the Silver Ship, as it seems to be the best hotel in the burg."

"Wa-al, stranger I am an old mountain-man, you know, an' have been so long used to sleeping in the open air that it kinder riles me to have to bunk in under a roof, an' so, as I happened to run across a deserted dug-out 'bout half a mile back, I made bold to put my

traps into it, an' that is whar we calculate to hang out to-night. You're welcome to take pot-luck along with us if you keer to."

"I am afraid I would be in the way," Buckskin returned.

"Not at all, sir!" the youth at once assured. "I hope you will come, for my father has a scheme on hand in which, perhaps, you might take a part."

Dick had fixed his keen eyes upon the youth the moment he began to speak, and studied the features intently; but, when the youth paused, he shifted his gaze to the face of the old man, puffed out a few mouthfuls of smoke and remarked:

"Well, I should not be surprised if we could make a trade. I'm a sport and always open for any good chance that comes along."

"Trot off with us to our dug-out, then, and we will talk the matter over," said Kruger.

"All right; I am with you!"

The three proceeded on their way.

"By-the-by, you said you had some plunder in this dug-out," Buckskin observed.

"Sart'in!"

"Are you not afraid that some one will discover your traps and make away with them?" Dick asked. "From what I have seen of this camp I fancy there are plenty of fellows in it who would be glad of such a chance."

"Oh, we've got a guard onto the plunder."

"A guard, eh? Well, it is all right then."

"Yes, a right hefty guard; a fifty-pound brindle bulldog, able to whip anything of double its weight that goes either on two legs or four."

"That is an odd kind of a pard," the sport observed.

"He will be faithful to any trust reposed in him unto death!" the youth assured, in the musical voice which had produced such an impression upon Dick when he first heard it. "And a faith like that," the youth added, "is something that cannot always be found in men."

"Very true," Buckskin assented. "Human nature is extremely uncertain."

"By the way, I hain't thanked you yit for coming in between me and those durned scoundrels!" the old man exclaimed, abruptly. "The galoots would have skinned me out of that fifty-dollar note, sure'n shooting!"

"Oh, that is all right," the sport replied, carelessly. "I did not want to see you robbed, and as I felt perfectly confident that I could handle the three ruffians, no matter how they came at me, I did not hesitate to interfere."

"Wa-al, I'm a squar' man, an' I allers try for to pay my debts, stranger, an' now I am going to fix you off for w'ot you did, by letting you into the biggest speculation that ever white man struck in this hyer region."

"Be careful, father! I would not say much until we are out of earshot of the town," the youth cautioned.

"Right you are, Alva; I'm too darned keerless all the time, so we won't chin any more until we are in the dug-out."

In ten minutes they were at the primitive home which some moneyless miner had constructed. It was simply a large hole in the hill, about ten feet wide and twelve deep, and high enough for an average-sized man to enter without removing his hat.

Within the excavation was a small burro and an ugly-looking brindled bull-dog, who kept watch and ward over the place.

He growled ominously at the strange, but pranced in the most affectionate manner around the youth.

"Be still, Jerusalem," the old man commanded. "Go out thar, lie down and keep yer peepers open, so that we won't be disturbed."

The dog seemed to understand, for, giving the patting hand of the youth a farewell lick, he went and stretched himself out in the center of the trail which was some fifty feet away from the cave.

"Sit down and make yerself comfortable while we talk matters over," requested the old tramp.

There was a log six or eight feet long within the cave placed parallel with the side nearest to the town, which had evidently been provided by the former occupant of the dug-out in lieu of chairs, and, as the old mountain-man gave the invitation, the sport took a seat upon the log—the others following his example.

The log being well within the cave, the three were sheltered from the direct rays of the moon, and yet there was enough light so that they could see each other distinctly.

"Now, pard, from what I have seen of you, I take it that you are a good, squar' man," Kruger began.

"Well, although I hold it unwise for a man to praise himself, yet I will say that I have always borne that reputation," Buckskin replied.

"I would have been willing to bet ducats on it!" the old man returned. "Now, pard, I am going to let you inter a big secret—I'm going to give you a chance such as mighty few men ever have the luck to get once in a lifetime, but if thar is any reason why you don't keer to go inter the thing arter you know w'ot it is, I want

you to give me your word of honor that you won't give the snap away."

"Certainly; you can depend upon my silence," the other answered, unhesitatingly. "Whether I go into the scheme or not, I give you my word as an honest man that I will not reveal to a living soul any secret which you may confide to me."

"That is squar'—that is all I want. I know you are true blue and I ain't afeard to trust you," Kruger assured. "From w'ot I have seen on you I reckon you are considerable on the fight."

"Well, without boasting, I think I may say that I always contrive to hold my end up," the sport confessed.

"Ar' you as handy with your we'pons as with your fists?" the old mountaineer asked.

"Why do you put such a question, father?" demanded the youth, a trifle of impatience visible in the tones. "Did you not see the gentleman throw the knife with a skill that not one man of ten thousand could hope to command? And is it not likely that he is equally skillful with other weapons?"

"Sart'in—sart'in! I reckon you ar' 'bout right thar," the old tramp admitted.

"The supposition is correct; I am a master with rifle and revolver as well as knife, and can also throw a lasso, as skillfully as any Mexican who ever coiled a lariat," the sport assured.

"You ar' jest the man I want, an' if you don't keer to meet a little danger—an' from w'ot I have seen of you to-night, I reckon you ain't easily skeered—I kin put you onto the biggest thing that war ever struck since gold was discovered in Californy."

"Is it the old tale of the secret mine?" Buckskin asked, with a quiet smile.

"Ah, I see," and the veteran shook his head; "you think I am going to ring in the old ghost story on you. Wa-al, it ain't so; it ain't the secret mine this time; but, it is the next thing to it—a 'pocket' up in the mountains in 'Pache-land whar nuggets from the size of a pea to some as big as a quail's egg kin be picked up. A million dollars in gold is right thar, in this hyer pocket, a-waitin' for to be h'isted out."

"In proof of the assertion here are some of the nuggets," added the youth, and from an inner pocket of his hunting-shirt the stripling produced a small buckskin bag, which he opened, and from it took out a half a dozen little nuggets of virgin gold and gave them to the sport.

Now, although Dick Buckskin had not said anything about being an expert in these matters, yet he was a good practical miner of much experience.

He examined the nuggets with a critical eye, took out his penknife and cut into one of the largest.

"This is the virgin stuff, and no mistake," he admitted. "And if you know where to obtain a hundred or so of these lumps, you will be independent, so far as this world is concerned."

"I know whar more than a thousand of 'em ar'!" the old mountain man declared. "The only trouble is to git at 'em, for, as I told yer, the pocket is up in 'Pache-land, in the country of that red nigger, Serape Colorado, who has sworn to kill every white man who dares to set foot inter the wilderness that he claims to own."

The dog, at this moment, began to growl in a low, but extremely ugly way.

"Some one is approaching," remarked the youth, peering forth.

"Some miner, probably, going to his home," the sport suggested.

"No, no, the brute knows almost as much as a human, and if it was any ordinary traveler, he would merely give a short, low bark, to let us know that some one was approaching; but that low, ugly growl signifies that a foe is skulking near. Some one has followed us, either to endeavor to overhear our conversation, or else with the idea of attacking us."

"Perhaps the gang have received reinforcements and are going to try their luck with pistols instead of fists, but, I reckon I can whip them, no matter how they come at me!" Buckskin observed with quiet confidence, drawing his revolvers from their holsters as he spoke.

CHAPTER V.

THE PLAINSMAN'S YARN.

The three peered forth earnestly.

The dog was still growling, but in low, suppressed tones, as though, while anxious to give warning that danger was near, yet did not want to allow the approaching foe to understand that he was discovered.

Dick Buckskin noticed this and commented upon it.

"Yas, he's a mighty good dorg, that 'ar brindled beast, Jerusalem," the old mountain-man declared, with a chuckle. "I have had him ever since he were a pup, an' he has been brought up right hyer on the border-line; but half his edication he got in the Injun country, an' I believe he kin smell a red-skin a mile off. I tell yer he is a heap of service to a man scoutin' in 'Pache-Land! So long as the dorg is along thar ain't much danger of runnin' inter ary Injun trap."

"A very valuable animal," the sport observed.

"Wal, you had better believe he is! I tell you, stranger, it would take a heap of money to buy that ar' dorg."

"I would not consent to his being sold, no matter how much money was offered," added the youth.

"That is 'bout so," the old man chuckled. "Alva is mighty fond of the dorg, an' ther pup sets a sight on him, an' it's r'ally curious how the pair seem to understand each other. The boy kin do twice as much with the dorg as I kin."

During this conversation the party had been engaged in trying to discover what made the dog uneasy.

"Can you see anything?" the sport asked.

"Well, I think I did," the youth answered. "Down the road toward the camp I thought I saw a man hiding behind the rocks, to the left."

Buckskin looked earnestly in the direction indicated, but discovered nothing of the enemy.

"The man has hidden behind a rock," the youth remarked, "but I got a glimpse of the fellow before he had time to conceal himself. He is still there, or the dog would not continue to growl."

The boulders clustered by the side of the trail were about a hundred yards away. Beyond these rocks the road was fringed with a growth of scrubby pines, so if it had not been for the vigilance of the dog the approach of the spy would not have been detected.

The dog had been lying at full lengih with his head between his front paws, but he now arose, gave a few more growls, walked a little ways down the trail toward the town with his nose in the air, as if trying to scent something, and then, with a fierce growl, turned about and resumed his former position.

"The spy—whoever it was—has retreated," announced the youth.

"Mebbe it was jest some straggler," old Kruger suggested.

"Oh, no, father," the youth replied; "if it had been any one ordinarily coming along the road the dog would not have growled."

"Wa-al, since he has cleared out it don't make no difference, nohow," the old mountain-man decided.

"No, not at present, but now that the spy has discovered where we are I should not be surprised if he has returned to report to those who sent him, and in that case there may be trouble ahead," the youth observed, thoughtfully.

"It doesn't matter much," the sport observed. "As long as your dog keeps watch we will not be surprised, and, warned of an attack, we ought to be able to hold this cave against a small army."

"That's so, bet yer life onto it!" the old mountain-man declared, resuming his seat.

"Now, then, I s'pose you would like to hear my yarn 'bout this gold-pocket?" Kruger remarked.

"Yes, I would, for I confess you have excited my curiosity," Dick replied.

"Wa-al, pard, you shall have it as straight as a string, and you kin go all the wealth you kin raise that ain't no ghost story either. I don't go for to say, you know, that I can't spin as tough a yarn as the best of 'em, when I am in for a thing of that kind, but I am going to give it to you straight, an' my boy thar will trip me up if I put in any fancy touches, for he has allers been brought up to tell the truth, an' he can't be hired to lie, nohow you kin fix it."

The sport glanced approvingly at the quiet youth, evidently satisfied with the old tramp's assurance.

"Go ahead; I'm all attention."

"'Bout two months ago I fell in with a lonely sort of cuss up at Prescott, who took a big notion to me, an' after we had run together a piece, he told me a mighty queer yarn. He was pretty nigh half-Injun, although a clear white man, an' the way of it was, he was captured by the 'Paches when a youngster, an', as one of the squaws happened to take a fancy to him, the reds, instead of knocking him in the head, made an Injun out of him, an' he was married to the squaw."

"He stayed with the 'Paches for nigh onto ten years; then his wife passed in her checks, an' he kinder hankered to be a white man ag'in. So, the first chance he got he scooted, an' as he was afeard that his red brothers would come arter him, he quit the reg'lar trails an' took right through the wilderness, sleeping by day in some thicket, an' travelin' by night."

"His way lay through the Mogollon Range, an' up thar, in a place so wild that it seemed as if the foot of a man had never left its mark thar, he found, on one of the head-waters of the Salt River, a 'pocket,' which for nuggets beat anything he ever heerd tell on, although during his stay with the Injuns he had heard some of the old bucks spin mighty big yarns 'bout how in the Mogollon Range, somewhar, they used to get metal which they made into yellow bullets to use in the guns which they were jest learning to handle, but, when the 'Paches discovered how crazy the white men war arter these same bul-

lets, they stopped using of them, for they were afeard that the'r hull durned country would be overrun by the pale-faces if they got the idea that the gold bullets were plenty thar. Only a few of the old bucks knew anything 'bout the matter, an' when they died off, the thing got to be considered jest a yarn."

"I have heard the story of the gold bullets before, and I know that many a good man has lost his life searching for the placer up in the Apache-Land," Buckskin remarked.

"True enuff. Wa-al, to make a long story short, the galoot wasn't in any condition to make any stay, so he jest gathered in a few of the nuggets an' lit out. It was his idee to git a couple of pards to go in with him an' come back for the gold."

"As he happened to run across you, I suppose you went in with him," the sport suggested.

"Right you ar', me an' Alva, although I was a leetle mite 'spicious that it might only be a ghost story arter all; but, it was a sure enuff fact. Arter a long tramp through the worst country that I ever see'd, we struck the leetle north fork of the Salt an' followed the stream up till we came to the ground. We struck it jest 'bout sundown, an' picked up a handful of nuggets afore we got our supper; then, ag'in' my advice, the galoot would kindle a fire, 'cos he sed thar wasn't any danger of the reds being 'round thar. I warned him that the durned cusses could smell smoke for miles, but he would go it."

"I can anticipate what happened; the Indians attacked and drove you away."

"You bet! 'Fore morning they were 'round us thicker than 'skeeters in a swamp, an' we had to run for our lives. Alva an' I stuck together, but the other galoot went off on his own hook, an' I reckon he went under, an' some big chief got his ha'r."

"It war arranged, 'fore we scooted, that we were to meet in this camp, 'cos he had a brother hyer, but I find that chap dusted long ago, an' nobody knows nothing 'bout him or ov my galoot; so the secret of the pocket is my property, an' if you want to go in with me an' Alva, I will be proud to have you."

"What do you say?" asked Dick of the youth. "Will it be agreeable to you if I join in the scheme?"

"Yes, for with such a man as you I feel sure we would succeed. Heaven knows we need money badly enough," replied the youth, with much earnestness.

CHAPTER VI.

BESIEGED.

THE boy's eyes were bent on the ground as if in a melancholy mood, and it was plain that the sport took a deep interest in the youth.

"We are pards, then?" Buckskin remarked, at last.

"You bet!" assented the old mountaineer; "to the death, if it comes to that."

"Pards should stick to each other to the death. How soon do you intend to start?"

"Jest as soon as we kin get a good ready," the old scout replied. "We must lay in provisions, for we don't want any shootin' of game in the 'Pache country, if you ain't anxious for to have the red niggers go for yer ha'r. We kin pack the grub on the burro, an' then the beast will be handy fer to tote the gold, for my idee is to git enuff to make us rich for the rest of our lives."

"I suppose it would be useless to attempt to work the lead—for there must be a lead somewhere in the neighborhood from which these nuggets have come?" Dick remarked, inquiringly.

"No doubt 'bout that, an' the lead must be a mighty big one, too, although you can't allers tell 'bout sich things for sart'in, you know," the old tramp responded. "I have heerd old miners allow that sometimes, when a nugget-pocket has been struck, the men w'ot found it went for the lode, but couldn't git onto it at all. But, Pard Dick, if this hyer spot whar we ar' goin' for was chock-full of the richest leads in creation, I opines that no white men would work 'em until the 'Paches were wiped out, root an' branch!"

"Yes, the red-skins always make it warm for all who try to locate in their country," the sport admitted. "A good many parties have tried to open mines in Apache-Land during the last twenty years, but the reds have been too much for them, every time."

"That's so, true as preachin'!" the old mountain-man averred, with earnestness. "I reckon I know a little something 'bout two or three of these riffles myself. Twenty odd year ago, Kit Carson an' I were pards, an' we did a heap of tramping all over 'Pache-Land arter game, an' pelts, so I know the lay of the country pretty well."

"My leetle rifle now is to sneak in an' sneak out; travel by night an' hide away in the day-time. The part whar I am going is about the wildest bit of country in 'Pache-Land, an', as a ginerall thing, the reds ain't up thar much, so if we are keerful in passing through the lower

country, an' manage to git along without the 'Paches gitting onto us, we won't probably be troubled in the upper region."

"I think you stand a good chance to make the trick," Dick remarked, "and I will be glad to go with you."

The conversation was suddenly interrupted. The dog gave a low growl, then rose to his feet, stretched out his nose, sniffed for a moment, then turned and trotted to the cave, uttering low growls.

"That means danger," the youth announced, springing to his feet.

The others also rose to their feet and advanced to the entrance of the cave.

The dog faced about and looked down the trail in a watchful attitude, and ever and anon uttered his low growl.

With the instinct of the frontier dweller, who fears a foe in every new-comer, the three had clapped their hands upon the butts of their revolvers, and presented a striking picture as they looked out upon the moonlit country.

"There is danger, sure enough! See those dark figures skulking among the pines and rocks; we are in for a fight!" exclaimed the sport in buckskin.

"Yes, there appears to be ten or fifteen of them," the youth added. "Be wary now, for we are in range, if they mean mischief; so let us drop back out of sight."

Hardly had the words been uttered when the sharp crack of a revolver sounded on the air.

The three darted back into the cave, flattening themselves against the walls.

The shot was not a good one, though, for it struck the bank above the mouth of the dug-out.

"They mean business," the sport remarked.

"You bet!" cried Kruger, "but I reckon we have got the deadwood on 'em, for this hyer cave is as good as a fort, an' we thre could hold it ag'in' an army as long as our ammunition held out."

This was true, for the cave entrance was considerably smaller than the interior, so that the occupants, by keeping near the walls, were guarded against the bullets of their assailants.

"But I say, sport, who do you suppose is working this leetle picnic?" asked the old scout.

"Those three big toughs who went for you in the saloon, I reckon. They have been running the town, and their defeat to-night has exasperated them. One of their crowd has played the spy on us, then gone back and told the three that we had taken refuge in this cave. The bullies, backed by their crowd, are after satisfaction, but I reckon we can stand the circus."

"You kin bet yer life on that!" Kruger exclaimed.

As if in response to this boast, there came a pistol fusillade from below; but, thanks to the protection afforded by the earth walls, none of the inmates were touched.

"That's your style, is it?" remarked Dick, now, apparently, ready for fight. "I rather guess we can return the compliment," and so saying he dropped on hands and knees, and, taking advantage of the shelter of the log, advanced until he could command a view of the trail, but only to ascertain that the shelter afforded by the pines and rocks was so complete that he was not able to distinguish one of the gang.

Then he tried the old trick of putting his hat upon the muzzle of one of his revolvers and holding it up, while in the other hand his pistol was ready for action.

The trick succeeded. No sooner did the hat appear than a dozen shots were fired at it, but not a single man appeared in sight. Only the pistol-flashes indicated where the shooters were.

Dick fired a couple of shots in answer, but evidently without effect, for all was still below.

The sport then withdrew from his advanced position.

"Well, if it is any satisfaction for them to waste their ammunition in blazing away at us, I suppose we ought not to complain as long as it doesn't do us any damage," said Dick Buckskin. "After awhile when they find that we do not notice their attack they may pluck up courage to make a rush and attempt to carry the cave by storm."

"Nary chance of their trying that game," Kruger replied. "They know 'bout this hyer dug-out as well as we do; they understand that if they tried any such business we could everlastingly salivate them. Oh, no, it will be thar game to keep back in the bushes an' try to lay us out without exposing themselves. They ar' p'ison cusses, an' go in for ringin' in a cold deal on us every time."

"Well, we might as well sit down and make ourselves comfortable," the sport remarked, suiting the action to the word.

"I will place the dog on guard. He can be depended upon to give us timely warning," the youth remarked, and, calling the mastiff, he placed him near the mouth of the cave, with the injunction:

"Keep good watch, Jerusalem!"

The intelligent brute wagged his stumpy tail, and pointed his ears forward as though he fully comprehended.

CHAPTER VII.

A FLAG OF TRUCE.

As Dick Buckskin had guessed, it was the Whip-Saw Gang who had made the attack.

His supposition, too, that it was one of their followers who had played the spy was also correct; and when this fellow returned to the saloon he took Pete Eelskin aside and revealed to him that the man who had whipped him and his pards so easily, had taken refuge in the old dug-out, in company with the old mountain-man and the youth. The rage of the bully was at once greatly excited. As he and his pards had in a measure recovered from the effects of their defeat, bruised and sore, they all were hungry for revenge, and, resolving not to give their wary foes any chance for their lives, proceeded to raise a force strong enough to "wipe out the outfit."

It was an easy matter, in a rough camp like Silveropolis, to find nine men who had no scruples about engaging in such an enterprise, and so, when the Whip-Saw Pards advanced to the dug-out, they had at their back nine others, as big ruffians as themselves.

It had been Pete Eelskin's idea to surprise his foes and make a sudden rush, but the dog upset his plan, and when the toughs saw that the occupants of the dug-out were on the alert they were careful to keep well sheltered.

It did not take the party many minutes, though, to come to the conclusion that, as long as the men whom they sought to damage kept within the cave they did not stand any chance of injuring them.

"Darn thar skins!" Pete Eelskin growled. "If we could only git 'em out of that we could flax 'em in no time."

"Yes, pard; there isn't any mistake about that, but the trick is to get them out," Parson Smith remarked.

"Be jabers! it's sinse they have!" Little Mike exclaimed, "an' thar they'll stay."

"Maybe so; but this hyer cuss in buckskin is so full of conceit that he might think he could warm us anyhow," the leader of the gang urged.

"He is not so big an idiot as that," the Parson averred, decisively. "All we kin do is to stay here and lay siege to their castle until they are forced to come out to get something to eat or drink and then warm them."

"Wa-al, that mought do, for I reckon the cusses hain't got no supplies in thar," Pete assented. "But it will be a long time to wait."

"Yes; for they can stand it until to-morrow noon sure," Smith assumed, "and by that time the camp will get onto the thing, and there is a chance that some of the citizens may interfere."

"Thar ain't ary chance of sich a thing!" Eelskin declared, boastfully.

"Well, I am not so sure of that," the other returned. "From what I saw in the saloon to-night I reckon there were a heap of men there who were not sorry to see us laid out. We have trodden on the toes of a good many men since we began to run the town, and if they united they would make it warm for us; and the fact that there is a dozen in our party against three in the other would give them a good excuse to interfere."

"Ye niver said a truer word in yer life," was Little Mike's opinion.

"But, w'ot ar' we going to do? ar' we going to give up the thing arter going to all this trouble?" Pete asked, angrily.

"I have an idea which I think will work," answered Smith. "Suppose we challenge our enemy to come out and fight us?"

"They would be blamed idiots for to do it!" Eelskin retorted—"that is, if they have any idea how many thar is of us."

"That is the point! I am reckoning they don't. They will think that us three are all they will have to fight, and, ten to one, this buckskin chap will jump at the chance to lay us out."

"It is worth trying, anyway," Eelskin decided.

The proceeding was soon arranged; the Parson was to act as messenger, so he took out his once white handkerchief, and cutting a switch tied the handkerchief to it for a flag of truce. This done, he stepped boldly forward from the pines which had concealed them.

"They want to have a talk," the sport observed, when he perceived Parson Smith advance into the moonlight.

"I reckon the durned galoots are trying for to fix up some kind of a trap," Kruger at once decided; "an' since they have made the diskivery that they can't harm us so long as we stick to the cave, they want to work some other racket."

"Just so," the sport assented. "I don't take any more stock in the scoundrels than you do, but they will have to be a deal smarter than I think they are to catch us in any trap they can set. I suppose I might as well do the talking."

"Had you not better let me go?" the youth interposed. "These men are evil-minded wretches, and I do not think they would hesitate at the crime of deliberate assassination."

"Is your life, then, less dear to you than mine is to me that you are so willing to risk it?" the sport asked.

"Oh, no! It is not my life that these ruffians seek—it is *yours*," the youth answered, promptly. "If there is a trap, it is designed to catch you, and if I go the chances are it will not be sprung."

"Good, sound sense, every time!" the old man declared, approvingly. "I tell you, pard, when Alva speaks he ginerally gits thar."

"Doubtless you are right, Alva. Go ahead, then, and see what the fellow wants," the sport said. "I will cover this rascal with my revolver, and if they come any treachery I will let daylight through him!"

CHAPTER VIII.

DICK'S DARING DECISION.

THE youth quitted the cave and advanced to meet Parson Smith, who, when he arrived within about fifty feet of the dug-out, came to a halt.

He was so near and the moonlight was so bright, that the two within the shelter had a good view of his features, and did not fail to note the expression of disgust on the Parson's face.

"Say, why didn't one of your pards come out?" he demanded. "You are nothing but a boy: I don't want to talk to *you*."

"You will have to whether you want to or not," the youth replied. "I speak for my comrades, and you'll talk to me or go back as you came."

"You are crowing pretty loud for a young cock sparrow!" the ruffian exclaimed. "Be your pards cowards that they send such a substitute?"

"Your face, Parson, looks very much as if you had encountered a *coward*. Pah! The fact is, Mr. Buckskin prefers to talk to *somebody*, when he talks, and you are nobody, you see. But, I'll answer for him and for my father, Mart Kruger; so go ahead and say what you've got to communicate, or go back to your sneaking gang."

The boldness of the boy quite astonished the Parson and the men in hiding, who heard all that was said, and seeing that their messenger was likely to be defeated in his mission, Pete called out:

"Go ahead, Parson, and hear w'ot the little cuss hev got to say to ver proposish."

Thus commanded, the flag of truce answered:

"All right, I will go ahead then. I suppose, youngster, you know who I represent?"

"Yes, the men who attacked our party in the saloon."

"Right you are, and we want satisfaction. Has your party got sand enough to come out of your cave and give us a good square fight? We will give you a fair show, but will lay you out all the same."

"Well, you ought to be able to do *that*, considering that you have about a dozen men to our three," the youth retorted.

For a moment Smith was disconcerted. How did the youth know there was a dozen?

"Oh, what are you giving me?" he exclaimed. "Where do you get your dozen men from?"

"We know that you have from ten to fifteen men, and if you did not outnumber us four or five to one, you would never dare to challenge us to a fight," was the bold reply.

"Oh, that is all bosh!" the rough protested.

"All we want is a fair show, and your party shall have one, too; so I ask—do you dare come out of your hole and fight?"

"Well, I will see what my pards think about the matter."

"All right; I will wait here."

The youth returned to the cave and made his report.

"Just as I suspected," confessed Dick. "Get us out to fight three men, with the others in ambush to jump on us!"

"Sure as ye'r born!" cried the old mountain-man. "Sneak-thieves to a man!"

"Well, they can't play *that* trick on us, but if they will draw out their men in a solid body on the trail, I am willing to fight the gang, even if there are twenty of them!" the sport decided.

"Now you hit me whar I live," the veteran scout responded. "I'm with you in the rifle, an' I reckon we won't have so big a fight as mought be supposed, for gangs of this kind ain't apt to stand up to the rack if the pepper gits hot."

"No; that is what I am calculating upon. It is my reckoning that if we make a bold dash we can stampede the whole caboodle. We two can do the trick, and you stay behind to cover our retreat if we fail in our attempt," to the youth.

The young man shook his head and fixed his dark eyes inquiringly upon the face of the sport.

"Do you doubt my courage, then, that you are not willing I should take a hand in the fight?" he asked, evidently offended. "My father will tell you that, although I am not old in years, I am skilled in the use of weapons, and have never been known to flinch in the time of danger."

"As true as Gospel, pard!" the old mountain-

man averred. "Alva has allers stood up an' taken his gruel like a major!"

"All right, I'm agreeable; it was not from any fears in regard to your courage or expertness, though, that I made the suggestion, but on account of your youth," Buckskin explained. "But, if you are eager to be counted in, I am willing."

"I will deliver our ultimatum, then!" and Alva returned to where the big ruffian stood in the road.

"Draw off your men; assemble them in the trail, a hundred yards away, and we will come out and fight you," was the rather surprising announcement.

Now, though this was not what the gang had expected, yet circumstances seemed to favor them so much that Smith did not hesitate to agree to the terms.

"All right! We are your mutton and we are ready to be skinned, if you can do the trick!" and, somewhat elate, he repaired to his comrades.

"Wa-al, if we can't lay 'em out with the advantages we've got, then we ought to be cleaned out!" Eelskin declared. "Let's git! I am jest hungry for blood!"

Out into the moonlight then marched the gang, and the men in the cave counted the fellows as they emerged from their places of concealment, so as to be sure that none remained behind:—one after another until the full dozen were aligned along the trail, about a hundred yards away.

Promptly then the three from the cave marched out into the trail. It did indeed seem reckless for them to encounter the twelve desperadoes ranged before them.

CHAPTER IX.

A BATTLE ROYAL.

"WHAT is your idea in regard to the management of this picnic?" Buckskin asked, as the three ranged in line across the road.

"Wa-al, pard, I've kinder got the idee that you ar' a pretty hefty man on this sort o' thing, so s'pose you g'in us *your* plan?"

"We will stretch out—ten feet or so apart, so as to scatter their fire; advance slowly, and when we are well within range and they begin to fire, we will drop on our faces, pick our men and see if we can't wing a few of them," the sport explained. "By playing this ruse upon them we may all escape being hit, for it takes a good marksman to touch a man flattened on the ground, while it will enable us to take the surest aim."

Old Kruger chuckled.

"Pard, I reckon you have done your share of fighting in your time!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, I believe I have," was the frank admission. "And experience has taught me that, in a matter of this kind, it is always best to take the bull by the horns. Twelve against three is apparently heavy odds, but it is safe to bet that of the twelve not more than six will make a good fight."

"That is so! it takes a heap of sand for a man to stand fire when he thinks thar is a good sight for him to be killed."

"I will take the men in the center, you those on the left hand, and your son the ones on the right," the sport now ordered. "That will make every shot tell. We must try and not waste a single bullet."

"You bet!" the old scout assented.

While this conversation was going on, the chief of the Whip-Saw gang spoke a few words to encourage his followers.

"We have got a dead-sure thing on 'em, boys!" he assured. "Why, it will be a reg'lar picnic! We won't make more than a mouthful out of 'em!"

"Bedad! it is a pity that there wasn't more of them!" Little Mike exclaimed. "Wid these illigant pistols in me fists I'll go bail that I am good for a pair of them meself!"

"We want to hold our fire until we get well within range," Parson Smith advised. "And as we advance we must kinder spread out so that we won't afford so good a mark as we would if we kept in a body."

"Now, hold your fire until I give the word, and then pi e right into them!" the Parson continued. "If we work the trick that way, we will probably wipe them out in the first rush!"

Most of the crowd were more or less under the influence of liquor, and therefore felt extremely warlike.

Slowly the two parties at length drew near to each other. Neither fired a shot until about a hundred feet of space was between them; then Smith shouted:

"Pick your men, boys, and sock it to them!"

The gang immediately opened fire, when down dropped the three upon their faces!

Completely deceived by this maneuver, the assailants yelled wildly in exultation.

"Durned if we ain't laid 'em out at the first pop!" Eelskin cried. "Sail in, boyees, and settle their hash for 'em!"

The quick answer was a volley which woke the gang from their dream of triumph—just three shots, fired so nearly together that the three seemed like one report—three shots fired with deadly aim!

Three men went down, and one of them was the chief, Pete Eelskin.

The gang, in its dismay and excitement, now fired wildly, not a bullet touching either of the three still prostrate forms, and again the answer was just three more shots—and three more of the gang went down, Parson Smith among them.

The advance of course came to a sudden halt.

"Now, charge!" yelled Buckskin, springing to his feet, his companions following his example.

That was enough! Panic-stricken and without firing a shot, the unwounded of the gang broke and ran, each man actuated only by one thought, to get out of range of those three deadly marksmen.

"The picnic is over," Dick Buckskin announced, as he watched the fleeing miners; "and now, pards, I opine is the right time for us to get out of this. These ruffians will soon return with half the town at their heels, and if we are corraled it will go mighty hard with us, so I move that we levant at once."

"That's solid wisdom, pard!" assented old Kruger. "It is now or never, I think. What do *you* say, Alva?"

"I believe with Mr. Dick, that if we stay here we will not get away at all," was the quiet reply.

Without even pausing to examine the condition of the wounded gang, or to ascertain how many were either killed or mortally hurt, the three expeditionists returned to the dug-out, and before any sign came of the return of their enemies, the little procession was on its way, old Kruger in the lead, heading to the northwest, quitting the main road for an old Indian trail which led through the foot-hills of the Cababi Range.

CHAPTER X.

IN APACHE-LAND.

WE will not weary the reader with the details of the uneventful journey of the three pards to the wild and wonderful country which the red chiefs claimed to own, and which is usually termed Apache-Land.

They were some fifteen days on the journey, proceeding with extreme caution after leaving Salt River and making their way up the small stream known as Mogollon Creek, and which rises amid the wild, pine-clad Mogollon Mountains.

They were now fairly in the very heart of the Apache country, and it was possible they might stumble upon some party of warriors at any moment.

According to the best information they had obtained, the Apaches were in the northern part of the territory, in the country watered by the Little Colorado and its branches.

And, as the old mountain-man declared, if this was true, there was a good chance for the pocket-seekers to get at the hidden store of gold, and get away with it without trouble.

But the party did not relax in their precautions. They traveled by night, and when morning came, selected some secure hiding-place and remained quiet there until darkness veiled the earth again.

On the night of the fifteenth day, when the gray light of the dawn was strengthening in the east, and warning them to seek shelter, old Kruger took a careful survey of the surrounding country, and announced that they were only some five miles away from the spot where a fortune awaited them.

"An' I reckon, boys," he added, "that we hain't got any need to play the sneak business any more. I don't believe thar is an Injun within a hundred miles of us, so I propose that, arter we take a few hours' rest we push on."

"Don't you think it would be better not to risk it?" the sport urged.

"Oh, I reckon it is safe enuff!" the old tramp replied. "We hain't seen nary sign to show that a red-skin has been in this hyer district since we started, so I opines, as everybody has allowed, that the reds are all up on the Little Colorado, an' that is a long way off."

"That is not safe to calculate upon," the sport warned. "Because the Apaches were in the Little Colorado country three weeks ago is no proof that they are there now."

"Correct," the other admitted. "I know the durned red niggers ain't to be depended upon, 'cos they are mighty like a Mexican flea, when you go to put yer finger on him he ain't thar. But, now, as we ar' so near the spot, an' the 'Paches hasn't shown up a top-knot ner a hoss-track, I says, go right along and no more dodg-in'."

Dick eyed the old fellow suspiciously, but said nothing.

"Yas, you hear me! I says go right along, after I gets a snooze, an' *that's* what I'll have if it bu'sts things; then we'll go on, an' inside of two hours from the time we start, I will show you the prettiest collection of yaller-boys ye ever laid yer two eyes on."

"I shall be glad to see them," the sport assured, as he followed the old scout into the little piece of timber which had been selected for a refuge.

This timber clump, some twenty-five or

thirty feet in diameter, was in a small valley, about half a mile wide by a mile long. Through the center of this level space, surrounded on all sides by hills, ran Mogollon Creek; here a shallow stream, about forty feet wide, but not over a foot deep.

It was one of those delightful vales such as are found here and there amid the wild Arid-land hills.

The little timber motte was admirably suited for the purpose to which the adventurers put it. It was rather open at the center and surrounded by a dense rim of bushes, so that when the burro, the dog and the three adventurers disappeared within it, they were entirely concealed from sight.

The old scout selected a sheltered nook, made a pillow out of his blanket, and in a few minutes was fast asleep.

The other two seated themselves near the edge of the timber and gazed out upon the bleak northern hills, a thoughtful expression upon their faces.

For ten or fifteen minutes neither spoke; then the old man began to snore, and this caused the sport to speak.

"What do you suppose has got into your father?" he asked. "I never saw him so apparently reckless and careless."

"Can't you guess?"

"Has he been drinking?"

"Yes."

"Well, I had that idea, but I did not know we had any liquor along, except the single flask which I suggested taking, in case of sickness."

"Do you remember that I objected to it, saying that I did not think it would be needed?"

"Yes, and your words at the time impressed me with the idea that you feared it might be drunk, and not saved for use in an emergency, so I packed it down in the bottom of one of the saddle-bags, and I am sure he hasn't been able to get at it."

"No, he has a flask concealed about him somewhere," the youth answered, sadly. "It is his one unfortunate failing, and he does not dull his senses with liquor except at a critical moment."

"Exactly the very time when he ought to let it alone!"

"Yes; do you remember his telling how, when he was on the eve of success—with the gold right before him—the cup of hope was dashed from his lips because the night before a fire had been kindled, the smoke of which attracted the Indians?"

"Yes, I remember."

"It was he himself who kindled the fire—his brains muddled with liquor—and to this day he is not conscious of the fact, but thinks that his companion started the flame."

"He shall not try any trick of that kind this time!" the sport announced. "If the gold is there we will have it, and no foolhardy act of his shall imperil the success of our enterprise."

The eyes of Alva were fixed upon the distant hills, vacantly as it were, not that he expected to discover aught there; but suddenly he laid his hand upon his companion's arm.

"Do my eyes deceive me," he asked, "or is there a thin column of smoke rising there to the northward?"

Dick looked toward the point indicated.

"You are right! It is smoke!" he confessed, rising, as also did his companion, and the two peered out through the trees.

"What does it mean?"

"Some hunters, maybe," the sport suggested.

"Or is it an Indian signal?" asked the youth.

"Have the red-skins discovered our presence in their land, and is this the smoke-signal of the Apaches, to warn every warrior who sees it that white men are in their territory?"

"In that case there should be answering signals."

"And there they are!" cried the other. "Look to the south and the east! Two more smokes are rising!"

"It is so! By heaven, we are surrounded by the Apaches!" cried Buckskin.

And then to the wondering eyes of the pair appeared the figure of a brawny warrior, perched on the summit of a distant cliff, who waved in the air a smoking brand—evidently one of the red signalmen.

CHAPTER XI.

THE INDIAN TELEGRAPH.

It was true; three thin columns of smoke were curling up on the air, one in the north, another in the east, and a third in the south.

The two watched the smokes for a few moments in silence.

By this time daylight had come, and the mists of the night had vanished, so that all objects could be plainly seen.

"There isn't any doubt about the matter," Dick remarked, with a grave shake of the head. "These are the signals of the Apaches. It is not the first time I have seen them, although I know less of these southern tribes than of the northern red-skins."

"And I know more of them, and of the Comanches, who are their neighbors, than I do of any of the other red-men," Alva observed. "I

have often seen the smoke signals, the really marvelous system of Indian telegraphy, by means of which they send intelligence with wonderful rapidity through the wilderness."

"So I have understood; these smoke signals, which all look apparently alike to us, in reality are very different, and are read by the savages who understand the system. One kind of smoke means that game is in sight; another that the game is on the move; a third that their territory has been invaded by a foe upon whom it is necessary to keep a watch, and a fourth is a summons to the chiefs to gather for the war-path."

"I think my father is well enough acquainted with the signals to be able to tell them apart, and understands what the most of them mean, but in his present condition, I doubt if he would be able to tell anything about them," the youth remarked.

"That is strange," commented the sport. "He does not seem to be much under the influence of liquor."

"He does not appear to be much affected, but in reality he is so. Years ago he received a severe blow upon the head in a frontier fight, which fractured his skull and forced a bit of bone in on the brain," the lad explained. "As it happened, there was a skillful army surgeon at hand. He performed an operation and so saved father's life, but, since that time, he has not been able to drink any liquor without its producing a strange result. It does not affect his body, but goes immediately to his head. While apparently it has not affected him, yet it muddles his brains so that he does not seem to have good sense—he is not able to reason clearly, and his intellect becomes dull and clouded."

"It is a singular case, indeed. But I can easily understand how such a thing can alter a man who has had such a delicate operation performed as the one of which you speak."

"Another strange fact is that after getting over the spell he is not conscious of what he has done while under the influence of the liquor."

"I should think, under such circumstances, that he would never touch it."

"He never ought to, for it makes an idiot of him, although one would never suspect, until he betrays himself by some foolish action, that there is anything the matter with him. My mother was conscious of his failing, and made me promise, on her death-bed, never to desert him, for she was fearful that some day this weakness might cost him his life."

"Not at all unlikely," the sport admitted, deeply interested in the recital. "It is unfortunate, too, that he should have got himself into this state just at the present time when he needs all his wits."

"Yes, it is indeed unfortunate."

"It looks to me as if we were going to have considerable trouble," Dick intimated, "for these smoke signals indicate that the red-skins are in the neighborhood."

"Undoubtedly!"

"Now, the question is: do they know that we are here?"

The other hesitated for a few moments before answering, but at last he shook his head, a grave expression on his young face as he said:

"I would like to say that I do not believe they do, but my opinion is that they do know we are here."

"I agree with you there; I think our presence is known, and that these signals have reference to us alone."

"My opinion, too."

"Three smokes," observed Dick reflectively, as he fixed his keen eyes upon the distant vapors, curling up distinctly against the clear sky.

"That means that there are three distinct parties of red-skins, but, of course, it is no guide to the number of braves in each party."

"Certainly not."

"There are then Indians to the north, to the east and to the south. We cannot advance without running into them; if we attempt to retreat down the creek the same fate awaits us; a new trail to the east is blocked, and only in the west is the way open."

"The timber prevents us from seeing the western sky. It may be possible that the Apaches are signaling from that quarter also."

"That is true, and, if that is the case, we are completely surrounded and all roads of escape cut off."

"Let us examine."

The two passed through the little clump of timber to its western edge, being careful however not to expose themselves beyond the fringe of bushes lest some sharp-eyed red-skin might be lurking within sight.

A moment the two gazed at the western skies; then Buckskin placed his hand in a caressing way on the shoulder of the youth.

"Well, young pard, we are in for it, I am afraid," he said, a touch of sadness in his voice.

Good cause had he for speaking in this wise. Against the western sky two distinct columns of smoke arose!

"We are completely surrounded." The youth spoke quietly, his face grave, but no sign of fear upon it. "What is to be done?"

"Nothing at present; we can only wait for events to develop themselves," the Buckskin Sport answered. "This timber-clump is as good a fortification as we will be apt to find, anywhere, and if it comes to a fight we will be able to make as good a one here as elsewhere. We are well supplied with provisions, and there is water right here, so we will be able to stand a siege."

"And if the Apaches are not in great force the chances are good that we will succeed in beating them off," the youth remarked.

"Yes, for we are well armed, have plenty of ammunition, and this is a remarkably strong position."

All this was true enough, for besides their revolvers, each one had a repeating-rifle, so that the three were equal to a score of red-skins with their clumsy weapons.

At the time of which we write, repeating-rifle had just been introduced, and the Indians were not armed with them, as they are, at the present day.

"We will hope for the best, although I am afraid that we are in a pretty tight place, for, to my thinking, so many smokes indicate that the Indians are in strong force, and though we might beat off a band of twenty or thirty, we could hardly hope to get away with a hundred or two."

"Very true; I am afraid that your opinion is correct, but all that is left to us is to keep up a stout heart and do what we can."

"Alva, you are as plucky a fellow as I have met in many a long day, even though you are so young that you cannot boast of a beard."

The youth appeared to be a trifle confused for a moment; then a faint smile crept over his face; he extended his hand to the sport.

"Young as I am, I will stick by you to the death!"

And the two clasped hands.

"Why, how cold your hand is!" Buckskin exclaimed.

"The sign of a warm heart, they say!" the youth replied, a peculiar light shining in his dark eyes. "It is not fear," he added.

"Oh, no, I am certain of that," the sport returned. "Well, suppose we resume our former position, for I have an idea that the attack will come from that quarter."

CHAPTER XII.

THE LORDS OF APACHERIA.

GRADUALLY the smoke died away, and with the disappearance of the signals new hope sprung up in the hearts of the watchers.

"It would be an odd thing if we have had our worry for nothing," the Buckskin Sport remarked.

"I sincerely hope that it is so, but I am afraid it is too good to be true."

"By the way, don't you want to lie down and get a little sleep?" asked Dick. "If there is trouble ahead, the chances are that you will not be able to get much after the circus begins, so you had better avail yourself of the present opportunity. I will keep watch."

"Much obliged to you for your offer, but it is useless for me to lie down; I am not at all sleepy now, and I would rather remain on the watch."

"How will your father be when he wakes up?"

"Unless he sleeps unusually long, I am afraid he will be about the same. It sometimes takes him two or three days to recover."

For a long time there was silence; both were apparently busy with their thoughts.

After a full hour the old mountain-man began to move restlessly, and then sat up and began to rub his eyes.

"Hey, pards, isn't it time we were on the move?" he asked, evidently unconscious in regard to how long he had slept.

"Oh, no, father; the sun is not yet fairly up," Alva replied. "We have all the day before us yet."

"What is the use of waiting until night afore we start?" the old fellow demanded. "We are right close onto the place and we might as well make a break for it now as any time."

"And expose ourselves to the risk of having the Apaches lift our top-knots?" the sport asked.

"Oh, no danger of any sech thing as that happening," confidently, and as if irritated.

"Well, it looks as if there was danger," and then Dick proceeded to relate the particulars in regard to the smoke signals.

At which revelation old Kruger laughed.

"Oh, I reckon you two chaps are kinder gitting skeered at nothing!" he exclaimed. "A leetle smoke ain't no sign that the red niggers are near. In this hyer clear atmosphere a man kin see smoke thirty or forty miles off; an' then, it might have been a party of white hunters—trappers, or something of that kind."

"Certainly white men could not have caused the five different smokes which we saw; that is impossible!"

"I reckon you must have made some mistake 'bout the matter. I reckon it must have been mist rising that you saw instead of smoke," the veteran persisted, obstinately.

"Oh, no, it was smoke, surely enough."

"Wal, even if it was the work of the red-skins, that ought not to prevent us from going ahead, 'cos the chances are big that they are miles away an' won't trouble us."

"Not a foot will I stir until I am satisfied that the Apaches are not in the neighborhood!" the sport announced, firmly.

"Then we will go on without you!" cried the old man, angrily.

"No, you won't!" responded the sport. "I shall not allow any move which may put in peril all our lives."

"Do you mean to say you will stop me by force?" demanded the old scout, getting on his feet, and his hand seeking the butt of one of the revolvers in his belt.

Buckskin had anticipated some such movement, for he was on his feet, and within reaching distance of the old mountain-man before the other was fairly erect.

"Yes, that is exactly what I mean!" he replied. "If you will not listen to reason I shall use force, for, leave this timber you do not until after sunset and the shades of night come in."

"No man shall boss me!" howled the old fellow, in a rage, and he drew his revolver, but the Buckskin Sport immediately closed in with him and of course in such a contest the old scout was like a child in the hands of his muscular antagonist.

Dick put Kruger down flat on his back, and then disarmed him.

"Now, then, are you going to behave yourself, or shall I have to tie you with a lariat?"

For a few moments the scout struggled in the iron-like grip of the other, and then, all of a sudden, apparently waking to the knowledge that it was useless for him to attempt to contend with a man so much his superior in strength, he stopped.

"All right, I am satisfied," he said. "Let me up; you kin be boss and run the consarn if you want."

"Oh, no, I don't care to run it," the other remarked, releasing the old scout and rising to his feet. "All I want to do is to keep you from doing anything which will not only endanger your own life but our lives as well."

Kruger rose to a sitting posture. The youth had got upon his feet when the contest began, but made no effort to interfere, seeming to understand that there was no danger to his father.

"I reckon you think you know what you are 'bout, but I know that you don't! I'm an old mountain-man, I am, a pard of Kit Carson's, an' I have seen the time when folks allowed that I was jest as good a man as he was, an' though I'm old, I reckon I ain't played out yit, an' you would be safe in betting a heap of dollars on that 'ar too!" and with that protest the old tramp stretched himself out and proceeded to go to sleep again.

The sport watched him for a few moments, a grave look on his face.

"In the event of a fight I don't suppose we could depend upon your father to do much work?"

"No, the accursed liquor takes away his strength and skill as well as his senses," the youth confessed with evident pain.

Slowly the hours passed away; the two watchers partook of a frugal meal, still keeping on the alert; then, when the sun, now high in the heavens, proclaimed that the noon hour was near, the dog, who was lying in the bushes a few feet away, apparently asleep, raised his head, pointed his nose to the southward and gave a low growl.

"Danger!" exclaimed Dick.

"It is the Indians;—the brute can scent them at an almost incredible distance," explained the youth.

The pair now watched with anxious eyes, the youth having called the dog to him and warned the brute to keep quiet.

Not long were they kept in suspense.

Within five minutes a band of braves, fully fifty strong, made their appearance, coming up the west bank of the creek from the south!

A half a dozen warriors were in advance, on foot, while the others were mounted.

The men in the timber understood what this meant, well enough.

"Those fellows on foot are the trackers; they are following on our trail," the Buckskin Sport decided.

"You have hit upon the truth," the youth replied; "we are trailed to our doom!"

CHAPTER XIII.

HEMMED IN.

As the band advanced less than half a mile away, the watchers had a good view of the red warriors, for there was not a bush even to intercept the view, and as both of them were well acquainted with the manners and customs of the red-men they saw immediately that it was a war-party.

There were no women nor baggage, and every one of the chiefs was gayly decked with war-paint, and a pretty picture, too, the Apaches presented as they came along at a slow trot, their hardy ponies tossing their pates and the plumed head dresses floating in the wind.

Notwithstanding the particularly picturesque

sight, it must be admitted that neither of the two concealed within the grove at all enjoyed the picture.

"As I suspected," the sport remarked. "I was hoping against hope, trying to persuade myself that this was only a hunting-party and that they were not following upon our trail."

The other shook his head.

"It is useless to be willfully blind to the truth," he said. "It is a war-party, the paint upon their faces proves that, and they are after us."

"No doubt about it."

And then the sport took a good look at the advancing red-skins, who were coming on in such a manner that it was evident that they had no suspicions that the foe upon whose trail they were pressing was so near.

"Let me see," continued Dick, his brow wrinkled by calculation. "I should judge that there were forty or fifty braves in the party, and they seem to be all pretty well-armed, too. It will be a tough fight to whip them, but I think we can do it. The only trouble, as far as I can see, is that just as soon as we pitch into these bucks the sound of the shots will bring some of the others to their assistance, for it is my opinion that those five smokes which we saw denote that there are five different bands in our neighborhood."

"Yes, I think that is correct," the youth remarked. "In my mind there is no doubt about it."

"Well, then, if the other bands are as strong as this one the total number will amount to about two hundred and fifty warriors, and a force as big as that we cannot hope to fight."

"No; a single dash would overwhelm us, and although it is the Indian policy never to lose a man if they can avoid it, yet when victory can only be bought by the risk of life there are no braver men upon earth to-day than these red warriors."

"That is true enough," the sport assented. "And by this time, too, the red chiefs are aware of the fact that they have only three men to fear. If there is more than one band, we are done for."

The youth nodded, his face grave and anxious.

"If there is not more than one I shall be agreeably disappointed," he said.

The conversation at this point was interrupted; the Indians came to a sudden halt, pulling their steeds up abruptly, the trailers ran back to the main body, and all of them fixed their gaze upon the clump of timber, and a number of the chiefs stretched out their arms and pointed to it.

"Hello, what the deuce has got into them?" the sport exclaimed.

"They evidently suspect that we are concealed here," the youth answered.

"Yes, I understand that, but what bothers me is, how on earth did they get the notion into their heads? How could they jump to such a conclusion at that distance? There isn't anything in the trail to indicate it, and it is utterly impossible that their eyes can be sharp enough to detect us amid the bushes at such a distance."

"That is a fact, and it is strange. I do not understand it," the youth observed, thoughtfully.

And then Dick Buckskin happened to glance to the north—the two were on the east side of the timber clump, and from their position, they could command a view to the east, to the north and to the south as well—and the moment the sport looked up the valley the reason for the abrupt halt of the Apaches was plain.

Another band was advancing from the north, following the course of the creek, and as the stream bent a little to the westward, a quarter of a mile or so beyond the line of the clump of timber, the second party had been hidden from the view of the first until a certain point was reached.

But the moment the two parties came in sight of each other both halted. The upper band, because they had been signaled that the lower one was on the trail of a foe who had dared to invade the red man's domain, and now, when they came in sight of the party, and had not found any evidence that a foe was in the neighborhood, they halted, not knowing what to make of it.

But the first war-party, following so closely on the "hot" trail, understood the situation.

The appearance of the other band advancing down the creek, indicated that the white adventurers had not passed up that way.

True, the intruders might have turned off either to the east or west, but as it was a wild and broken country, full of obstacles to the traveler, the red-skins wisely judged that it was extremely improbable that the white men could have selected such a route, and so it was only natural that they should immediately come to the conclusion that the prey they sought had taken refuge in the clump of timber.

A low exclamation had escaped from the lips of the sport when his eye fell upon this second band of red-skins, and it attracted the youth's notice, and caused him to turn his gaze in the same direction.

"We are between two fires!" Alva exclaimed.

"Yes, and the mystery of the halt is explained," Dick Buckskin rejoined. "It looks now as if we were going to have an extremely lively time, for this party is a bigger one than the other."

This was true, for there were fully seventy men in the second band, and from the gay trappings of one of the chiefs who rode in the advance, a brawny, middle-aged warrior, it would appear that he was a chief of note.

Dick Buckskin called his companion's attention to this chief, and remarked that he was a warrior of importance.

The youth surveyed the party for a moment, then nodded his head slowly.

"You are right," he said. "That chief is second to no man in the Apache nation, for it is Serape Colorado, the greatest warrior of the tribe."

"I have heard of him, although I never met the man before," the sport remarked. "And report says that he is a bloody-minded brute, as cruel and remorseless as he is brave."

"Rumor in this case does not exaggerate in the least," Alva replied. "Serape Colorado by his deeds on the war-path has proved that he is one of the greatest braves that the Apache nation has ever known, and experience has proven to the white men, who have been unfortunate enough to encounter him, to their sorrow, that he is a treacherous brute who sometimes seems to kill for the mere love of killing."

"We are in the tightest kind of a place," the sport remarked. "And if we succeed in getting out of this without losing our scalps, we will be able to boast that a miracle has been worked in our favor."

"Two of us against a hundred odd red warriors," and Dick Buckskin shook his head. "In your father's condition we can't count him in, so it is you and I against this host."

"The struggle is too unequal," the youth remarked, slowly, a look of resignation appearing on his dark features, "and it is not possible that it will last long."

"Two courses only open to us, to surrender and trust ourselves to the tender mercies of these red-skins, or to fight to the last gasp, contenting ourselves with killing as many of the red warriors as we can, so as to have plenty of company in crossing the dark river to the unknown land from which no traveler returns."

"Well, it seems to me that it would be better to surrender if we are satisfied that we cannot hope to beat off the attack," the youth remarked, thoughtfully. "The Apaches are supposed to be at peace with the whites now, although it must be confessed that these chiefs in their war-paint do not look much like it, and by professing that we are friends to the Apaches, we may be able to induce them to allow us to return to the settlements—perhaps buy our liberty, for these red-skins know the value of money well enough and have been known to take gold in lieu of blood, but if we resist and kill any of the braves, then nothing but our death will satisfy the rest."

"That is the truth; your ideas are exactly the same as mine. There is no use of showing fight unless we stand a fair chance to win, and, to my thinking, there is not much chance of our escaping from the clutches of these red devils if they once get hold of us, for no matter how much the Apaches may protest that they desire peace with their white brothers, yet when they are lucky enough to catch a few white men up in their territory, they generally forget all about the peace business until they put their prisoner through a course of sprouts."

"Yes, they are a treacherous race, but as we are helpless in their power we must trust them."

"Hello, there's another party!" cried the sport, at this moment.

And it was true.

From the wooded foot-hills to the east came a third band of red-skins, fifty-odd men, and upon deploying into the valley they came to a halt upon perceiving the others.

"That settles it now!" Dick Buckskin exclaimed.

"And there are still two more parties to the west of us," the youth observed.

Then acting upon the same idea the two stole through the timber and looked to the west.

The sight which they expected to see met their eyes.

From the wild and broken country to the westward of the valley came two more bands of Apache warriors, a good hundred men all told.

The gold-seekers were completely surrounded.

CHAPTER XIV.

A "TALK."

Now that the five bands had made their appearance it was plain that the Buckskin Sport's calculation that there were fully two hundred and fifty warriors whom they would have to face was not at all out of the way; in fact, there were rather more than less than that number.

"It is no use to think of fighting now," the sport remarked, as he and the youth gazed upon these two new bands. "Twenty five or

thirty men might stand some show, but the chances would be against them."

"Yes, we must trust to the red-skins' mercy; there is no other hope for us," the youth replied.

"Wa-al, boys, ar' ye 'bout ready for a start?" asked the old mountain-man, abruptly.

The pair turned and saw that Kruger was sitting with an extremely wild look upon his face.

He had been awake for a few minutes, and had taken advantage of the fact that the attention of the two was diverted from him to drain dry the pint whisky-flask which he had concealed in his pocket.

The liquor immediately mounted to his brain and made him more light-headed than before.

"No, not yet," the sport replied. "We will not be able to move, for we are surrounded by Indians."

"Oh, that is all right!" the old mountain-man responded, with a lofty wave of the hand. "It is the 'Paches, old friends of mine; I know 'em all: old pards—Serape Colorado an' his she-devil of a daughter, Chico Colorado, Mangus Colorado, his brother, an' if anything a bigger rascal than t'other chap, Gray Buffalo, Painted Oak, an' the rest of the big red niggers. They know me, all of them, an' thar's no man in the land whom they fear more, 'cept old Kit Carson, p'haps; he's a side-pardner of mine—many an' many is the day we have spent in the wilderness together, we have—have—yes—you bet!"

And then, his voice sinking into an indistinct murmur, he stretched himself out and went to sleep again.

"You see, he does not comprehend the situation," the youth remarked, sadly. "The vile liquor has almost made an idiot of him."

"If we are doomed to die, perhaps it is as well," the sport remarked, "for he will be spared the agony of anticipation that is in store for us."

The two made their way back to their former position, from which they commanded a view of the band led by Serape Colorado, for they understood that it was with him they would have to deal.

The red-skins had been communicating with each other, despite the distance which intervened between the bands, by means of the Indian "sign" language, like the deaf and dumb alphabet enables those who are acquainted with it to carry on a conversation without the use of words.

"They are arranging the programme," the sport remarked; "do you notice them telegraphing to each other?"

"Yes, and if my father had the use of his wits he would be able to understand what they are saying, for he knows the sign-language as well as any red-skin in the land."

After a few minutes of this pantomimic work the command was apparently given for an advance, for all five of the bands commenced to move toward the clump of timbers at the same moment.

The red-skins spread out as they came on, so that when they came to a halt within easy rifle-range of their objective point, the timber-clump was surrounded by a complete circle of red warriors; at one point only was there a cluster of warriors, and that was where the great chief of the Apache nation, Serape Colorado, rode.

After the line came to a halt, a brawny young chief, mounted on a "clay-bank" mustang, spurred forward toward the timber, and as he came on, he extended his hands, with open palms, above his head, this being the peace-sign of the red-skins, the same as the white flag of truce, common to civilized nations.

"He comes for a talk," the sport observed. "I know the chief; he is called the Gray Buffalo, and is one of the leading warriors of the nation."

"He looks like a good man, but would be an ugly customer in a skirmish," the sport remarked, surveying the savage as he advanced with the eye of an expert. "Shall I do the talking?"

"Certainly!" the youth exclaimed; "you are far better suited for it than I."

The Apache warrior rode to within fifty feet of the timber and then checked his horse.

Dick Buckskin, with his rifle carried in the hollow of his arm, stepped forth from the bushes which had sheltered him, and all the red-skins craned their necks to get a sight at the bold white man who had dared to invade Apache-Land.

"Is my white brother the great brave of his party?" the red warrior asked, gazing with considerable curiosity upon the muscular developments of the other.

"Yes, I reckon I can lay claim to that honor," the sport replied.

"I come from the great chief of the Apache nation, Serape Colorado," said the brave, who spoke English as fluently as though it was his mother tongue.

"I am pleased to see my brother," the sport responded. "Although I have never met the great chief from whom he comes, yet his fame is so great that I have often heard of him."

The warrior inclined his head in acknowledgment of the compliment.

"Serape Colorado is the lord of the Apache-Land," the chief remarked. "Does not my white brother know that he is treading on forbidden ground when he comes up amid these mountains?"

"Of course I am aware that I am in the Apache country, but I was not aware that there would be any objection to my passing through it in a peaceable manner," the sport replied.

"What does my white brother seek in the hills of the Apache-Land?"

"Merely passing through it, bound for the white settlements on the Rio Colorado."

This was the truth, for it was the intention of the party, after securing the gold, instead of retracing their steps, to go through the broken country to the north and thus reach the settlements on the Colorado River.

This was to baffle any of the red-skins who might discover their entering trail and lie in wait for them on their return.

The Indian shook his head in a very grave manner.

"Does not my brother know that by treaty this land is reserved to the red-man, and that the whites have no right even to pass through it?" he asked.

"I knew that this was Apache territory, of course, but I did not think that there would be any objection to my simply passing through it."

"It is against our laws, and my white brother and his companions"—and here the speaker peered with his keen eyes amid the trees, as if anxious to see where the rest of the whites were—"must surrender themselves to the Apache chief, so that he and the wise men of the Apache nation may decide what punishment the offense deserves."

"Well, chief, under the circumstances we will have to surrender, for you have the force to compel us to yield."

During this conversation the Indians had played one of the tricks which have often been worked upon unsuspecting white men invited to a "talk."

As soon as the red-skins believed that the attention of the whites was fully occupied, they began to slowly advance, allowing their animals to graze on the prairie grass, but always directing their course so that each step took them just so much nearer to where the talk was being held, and by the time the conversation had reached the point where we interrupted it to explain about this wily dodge, the red-skins had got fully one-half nearer to the little clump of trees than they had been at the beginning of the talk.

The idea of this was that if the interview ended in an unsatisfactory manner they would be so near that by a sudden rush the whites could be overwhelmed.

Dick Buckskin was well posted in regard to all these tricks, so dear to the heart of the red-man, and did not fail to notice what the Apaches were up to, and he laughed in the face of the red warrior as he said:

"Signal to your braves that it is all right—that we have agreed to surrender, and that there isn't any necessity for their creeping in so as to be ready to make a dash."

The savage affected to be greatly astonished, and cast his eye around at the Indian line as if to assure himself that the white man had spoken the truth.

"It is the horses grazing," he explained. "My white brother need not fear to trust to the honor of the Apache warriors! They would scorn to take an unfair advantage of even a deadly foe."

"Oh, yes, these little accidents will happen sometimes," the sport remarked, with an incredulous smile.

Then he called out:

"Wake up your father, Alva, and come out. We have surrendered."

But the youth had already attended to rousing the old mountain-man, and now made his appearance leading the burro and with the dog in a leash; old Kruger followed, a vacant expression on his face.

The Gray Buffalo signaled to his comrades that the white-skin had surrendered, and the Indians advanced rapidly.

Serape Colorado rode up at the head of his band.

At this time of which we write Serape Colorado was a man of fifty, a muscular, brawny chief, with an ill-looking, iron-like face.

He was dressed in a highly-ornamented hunting-shirt, as became the great war-chief of the powerful Apache nation, and from under his plumed war-bonnet his long, raven-black hair, carefully braided, floated in the breeze.

No Broadway dandy was ever more careful in regard to his personal appearance than this red-handed, iron-hearted butcher, who had the reputation of having killed more than a hundred white men since he first decked his face with the war-paint of a chief.

CHAPTER XV.

KRUGER ASTONISHES THE REDS.

SERAPE COLORADO halted his pony directly in front of Buckskin, and surveyed the sport intently, an ugly scowl on his dusky face.

"Wah! what does the white man in the land of the Apache? Does he think the red-men have water in their veins instead of blood? Are chiefs of the Apache nation dogs that the white man shall walk over our land, kill our game, defile our springs and tread on the graves of our fathers with iron-nailed moccasins?"

The effect of this fiery speech was to cause the eyes of the Indians to glare with rage; deep exclamations of anger came from their throats, and weapons were brandished menacingly in the air.

The sport smiled contemptuously.

"Oh, come, draw it mild!" he exclaimed.

"What is the use of your going on in any such style as that? You know well enough that we haven't hurt anything or anybody. We are merely crossing your territory in order to save time. We are bound for the new gold-diggings on the Rio Colorado."

"More likely that you come to seek for gold amid our hills!" Serape Colorado exclaimed, relaxing a little in his fierce expression when he discovered that the white man was not disposed to be brow-beaten.

"Oh, yes; it is very likely that we three men should attempt to strike a lead in Apache-Land!" the sport rejoined. "If we had about a thousand in our party then there might be some chance of standing you red chiefs off."

A grim smile passed over the dark face of the chief, showing that he appreciated the compliment.

"Two thousand men could not hold a mine in Apache-Land!" he declared. "The red warriors would sweep them away as the whirlwind does the rotten trees."

"Well, I reckon you would give them a pretty good fight," the sport admitted.

"You are a stranger to Apache-Land," the chief remarked, after surveying the Buckskin Sport attentively for a moment. "Serape Colorado knows you not."

"No, I don't think that I ever had the pleasure of meeting you before," the sport replied, with a polite bow.

"How is my white brother called?" asked the red chief, evidently very favorably impressed by the cool and daring sport.

"Well, I have borne quite a number of names in my time," said the other. "At present I am traveling under the title of Dick Buckskin, but that is not my real handle. My name is really Richard Talbot, and I am a rancher; my place is near Arivaca, down near the Mexican line."

"Raise cattle, hey?"

"Yes, and on a pretty extensive scale, too," the sport replied. "So much so that my neighbors usually call me the Ranch King."

"Me know," and the brawny chief nodded his head, "big ranch—many cattle," and the red-skin waved his hand around.

"Yes, I have done pretty well, and if you choose to put a fine on me, chief, for intruding upon your territory, I will be able to pay it, if you don't put it onto me too heavy."

The chief fixed his glittering, snake-like eyes full on the face of the sport for a moment.

"When the white man comes into the Apache-Land and begins to burrow in the dirt after gold, the red-men, if they catch him, kill him and take his scalp to dry in the fires of their wigwams."

Ferocious indeed was the speech, but if the red-man thought that it would cause the white man to quail he made a great mistake.

If the reader is an old acquaintance of Richard Talbot and has followed him through his adventurous career, he knows that no man who ever set foot on the earth better deserved the name of a brave man than bold Injun Dick.

Politically too was our hero. Long experience had taught him that the savages, being but little above the brutes themselves, were more impressed with a display of brute courage than anything else, and so even if he had feared that there was no chance of escape and that his life would pay the forfeit of this bold invasion of the Indian territory, neither by word or deed would he betray the fact.

And so again he laughed in the face of the old red butcher.

"Well, that doesn't apply to me, you know," he remarked. "I am no miner and I did not come to dig for gold in Apache-Land."

"Mebbe not," but the red chief shook his head as if he did not feel at all sure in regard to this point.

"White men always lie when the red chiefs catch them. They say, 'Oh, no, no gold—we no miners,' then we find the tools—and blood and scalps come after."

Terribly sinister was the way in which Serape Colorado hissed out the words.

"Well, I am telling you the truth about the mining," Talbot replied. "And if you find any tools in our outfit I will agree to eat them, and I am perfectly willing that you should scalp me afterward as soon as you please."

"Take their weapons!" commanded the chief.

Some of the warriors advanced, and the sport and youth gave up their arms, but the old mountain-man protested.

"Hol' on, me noble red bucks, w'ot ar' ye 'bout?" he cried. "Ye ain't a-going to take the

we'pons away from a feller you know, hey? I say, chief, you remember me, don't ye? Old Mart Kruger, Kit Carson's pard?"

A terrible scowl came over the face of the Apache chieftain. If there was a man in the world whom he hated and feared, it was the renowned scout, Kit Carson.

When he was a young brave, and had already won a namesecond to no man in his tribe on the war-path, he had encountered Kit Carson, then but a boy in years, and in the fierce battle which ensued between the two, the brawny red brave was awfully whipped, receiving wounds which laid him up for many a long day.

It was not wonderful, then, that when the man was recalled to his memory, who had given him the worst beating that he had ever received during his wild career, that a demoniac frown should wrinkle his brow.

Both the sport and the youth saw that the old mountain-man had made a terrible blunder by mentioning Carson's name, but they did not attempt to interfere, for in the old man's present condition it would have been useless.

"Ugh!" grunted the savage, fixing his keen black eyes on the old man's face. "Me think me know you."

"You better believe you and I am the cl'ar white article an' no mistake! All wool an' a yard wide, whoop!"

The old mountain-man yelled as loudly as he could, and then he commenced dancing around like a madman, discharging his rifle in the air.

The red-skins, not knowing what to make of this unexpected movement, gave him a wide berth; they did not attempt to harm him, for they comprehended that the white man was not at all inclined to be hostile.

After he had fired all the loads in his repeating-rifle, yelling and capering about as he did so, he cast the piece on the ground and drew his revolvers, which he also proceeded to discharge as rapidly as possible.

"Hi yah! look at me, ye 'tarnal red imps!" he yelled.

"Hyer I am as you may diskiver,
All the way from Roaring River,
Hyer I am as you must know,
Come to sing an' pick on de ole banjo."

By this time he had emptied both of the revolvers of their charges, cast them to the earth, grabbed up his rifle and proceeded to handle it as if it was a banjo.

"Forty hosses in a stable
All along a length of cable!"

he roared, at the top of his voice, and in the most unmusical way, still capering about, and making believe to play on the rifle as if it was a banjo:

"I went down to the river,
I couldn't get across,
I swapped my mar' for an' ole bay hoss!
Oh, take yer time, Miss Lucy,
Oh, take yer time, Miss Lucy!"

"Ah, the cussed banjo is all on fire!" he yelled, suddenly, and then he dashed the rifle to the earth as if he believed the gun was really burning his fingers.

With a series of blood-curdling yells he danced around the gun until he was seized with a fit; tearing at the air and spitting like an enraged cat, he tumbled to the earth, where he writhed and howled, more like an animal in mortal pain than a human being, until at last nature yielded under the terrific strain, and he sunk into insensibility.

The Apaches had watched the scene with awe-stricken eyes.

Many old warriors were there on the ground, but none of them had ever witnessed a scene like this before, and from the expression upon their faces, it was plain that they did not know what to make of it.

When the old man tumbled to the ground the youth flew to his assistance, and as soon as he became quiet so that he could aid him, opened the buckskin hunting-shirt so as to give him air.

Talbot was one of those peculiar men whose wits always worked doubly quick in an emergency, and as he watched the antics of the old mountain-man, crazed for the time by the vile liquor which he had drank, and noticed the awe written so plainly on the faces of the Indians, an idea occurred to him—an idea which would result in saving the life of the old man, even if he and the youth were destined to perish.

Being thoroughly acquainted with the manners and customs of the Indians, Talbot understood that the red-men, like nearly all other savages, had a profound respect for lunatics.

Unfortunate souls bereft of reason were considered by them to be under the especial protection of the Great Spirit, and the average Indian would submit to much from a mad person before undertaking to harm him in any way.

So when Serape Colorado looked at Talbot inquiringly, after the old man fainted, as much as to ask what it meant, the sport tapped his forehead with his finger, then pointed to the sky and bowed his head in a reverent manner.

By this he meant to say that the man had lost his wits, and was under the direct protection of the Great Spirit.

CHAPTER XVI.

CHICO COLORADO.

THE majority of the warriors had noticed the pantomimic explanation given by Talbot, and soon the word went around that the old white man was one of those favored mortals who was under the direct care of the Great Spirit.

The ruthless red chief was not sorry to secure such a captive, for the presence of one of these unfortunates is considered good luck to the tribe which gives him shelter.

"The Apaches will take good care of the old man," Serape Colorado said to Talbot. Then walking his horse up to where the sport stood, so that by bending over he could whisper in his ear, he continued:

"Does the Great Spirit ever give the old man visions so that he can look into the future?"

"Yes, very often, when the moon is new," Talbot answered, speaking with extreme solemnity as befitted such a subject. "Last night the new moon came and he communed with the Great Spirit, lying like one dead, and he predicted that we would all be captives in the camp of the greatest red chief who wears the war-paint in the Western wilds."

This little bit of flattery tickled the pride of the brawny Apache, and he nodded his head while his chest seemed to fairly increase in size.

"That is the truth!" he said, proudly. "From the gates of Durango to the mountains of the north there is no red chief who is the equal of Serape Colorado. The Comanches fly before me when I take the war-path as the coyotes run when the grizzly bear comes down the mountain-side; the Navajoes—they are dogs—when they see the plumes of Serape Colorado's war-bonnet dance on the breeze, they howl for fear; the Mexican shuts himself up in his walled town with his big guns and dares not venture upon the open plain. Even the blue-eyed North Americans, the best fighters of the lot, with their long rifles, dare not brave the power of Serape Colorado in Apache-Land."

It was a boastful speech, and yet there was a deal of truth in it as Dick Talbot knew, being well posted in regard to the chief and his deeds, for the story of Serape Colorado's bloody raids were the common property of the loungers in the frontier stores and saloons.

"Yes, although I never happened to meet you before, I have often heard it said that you had taken as many scalps as any brave who had ever gone on the war-path in Arizona."

"More!" cried the chief, proudly. "More! there is no warrior, living or dead, who has taken as many scalps as the great Apache chief."

"I reckon you're about right there," Talbot remarked. It was his game just now to get on the right side of the brawny Apache brave, and if this could be accomplished by so easy a method as ministering to the red-man's vanity, Dick Talbot was not the man to refrain from working the trick.

"When the new moon comes again the Great Spirit will speak to him?" the savage asked, evidently very eager in regard to this information.

"Yes, undoubtedly."

"And do you understand how to gain from him the information which the Great Spirit gives?"

And now Talbot, with that rare unselfishness which was so prominent a part of his character, saw a chance to save the life of the youth, and he spoke, preferring that Alva should profit by the use he was making of the Indian superstition rather than be himself.

"The youth who is now helping the old man—his son—is the one who understands all about it. He is able to get the old man to deliver the message given him by the Great Spirit every time. Without the aid of the boy I don't think you could get anything out of the other."

"It is good!" exclaimed the red chief in a tone of extreme satisfaction. "The Great Spirit smiled on his Apache children when he permitted them to capture the white prophet."

By this time, thanks to the untiring care of the youth, the old mountain-man had recovered from his faint, although he was still very weak, for the exertion through which he had gone had been enough to fatigue a far stronger man than he, for the old fellow was old, and not the powerful, wiry athlete that he once had been.

All the Apaches, from the chief, Serape Colorado, down to the lowest warrior, were hugely delighted with the success which had attended their efforts.

To capture a "white prophet" who would be able to predict the future and so enable them to regulate their movements so that they would not fail to win success, either when after game or scalps, was a lucky find indeed.

Then, too, Talbot was a good, stout fellow, and they flattered themselves that they could have a deal of sport with him after they arrived at the main village.

The captives were provided with mounts, but each man had a brawny savage behind him, and they were placed in the center of the cavalcade, so there wasn't any possibility of any of them escaping on the road, so the line of march was taken up for the Apache village.

It was some thirty miles away in a small valley, situated in the foot-hills of the Mogollon Mountains, on a shallow creek which was one of the head-waters of the Little Colorado River.

It was as romantic and picturesque a situation as could well be found.

There was splendid grass for the ponies in the valley, excellent water, the adjoining country was full of game, the tribe had just ended their annual spring buffalo-hunt, which had been extremely successful, and now all the workers of the villages—mainly squaws, of course, for the noble red-man disdains to work at any trade but the twin occupations of fighting and hunting—were busily engaged in curing the meat and preparing the skins.

Every soul in the village was on the alert when the lookouts promulgated the intelligence that the warriors were returning.

We neglected to mention, by the way, that the brindle bull-dog, the sagacious Jerusalem, excited general attention after the capture was made.

None of the red-skins had ever seen a dog of the kind before, and the particularly "open" expression of his countenance impressed them with the belief that as a fighter he would be an extremely difficult customer to handle.

The reds did not like the looks of the dog, and were careful to keep out of his way, and on his part it was with difficulty that the youth kept the bulldog from flying at the throats of the braves.

But when the cavalcade arrived at the Indian village and the pack of Indian dogs came forth to greet the braves, and espying Jerusalem made up their minds to instantly devour him, the brindle bull could not be restrained; he broke loose and in a second there was as fine a dog-fight as any man in the party had ever seen.

The red-skins roared with delight and the entire procession was brought to a halt while crowded around the snapping, snarling brutes.

The Indians, of course, naturally supposed that the white man's dog would stand no chance against such odds and they looked to see him fairly eaten alive.

But the undersized half-wolf dogs of the Apaches, although savage and ugly enough, were no match for an experienced, heavy-weight fighting bulldog.

Soon the snarls rose to howls of pain as Jerusalem made his iron like jaws meet in the flesh of his opponents.

There were so many of the Indian dogs that they were in each other's way, and half the time they were biting one another in the belief that it was the stranger, but no dog that got a taste of the brindle bull's quality cared to stay for a second trial.

Howling vociferously, they limped away one by one and within five minutes the brindle bull was master of the field, all of the Indian dogs being in full retreat, and, as far as could be seen, the beast had not secured any serious hurt.

Strange as it may appear, the red-skins were delighted with the defeat their dogs had sustained, for it showed them that in the beast they had captured they had secured a brute worth a hundred common ones.

Joyful were the cries with which the squaws and children greeted the return of the war-party, and vile were the taunts and insults that they flung upon the helpless prisoners.

No matter how many treaties of peace the red-skins sign with the white men, it is always war when a pale-face finds his way into an Indian village.

It is the knowledge of this fact—of the horrible outrages that the red-skins perpetrate upon helpless prisoners, oftentimes women and children, which has caused the frontier saying, "There is no good Indian but a dead Indian," to pass into a proverb.

The wigwam of Serape Colorado was situated in the center of the village; it was larger than any other in the settlement with the exception of the one used as the council-chamber.

The wigwam of the chief was surrounded by four smaller ones, and in these the squaws of the Apache chieftain lived; he boasted four wives, and, like a true monarch, did not allow any of them to occupy the same apartment that he honored with his presence.

One of the squaws' wigwams was taken for the prisoners, the two oldest and ugliest wives being made to occupy the same apartment.

A strong guard was placed around the lodge in which the three were confined, and then satisfied that the prisoners could not possibly escape Serape Colorado retired to his wigwam. The rest also went to their lodges in order to prepare for the great pow-wow which would be held that night to celebrate the bloodless victory which had been won.

Serape Colorado had hardly got fairly seated, when without ceremony a young Indian squaw entered.

She was tall and straight, light in color, for her mother had been a white woman, splendidly formed, with all the wild, savage beauty of the panther, robed, too, in a garb such as no other squaw in the tribe could boast.

This was the Apache princess, Chico Colorado, old Serape's favorite child, the idol of the red butcher's heart, and no wonder, for she was as fierce and proud in her way as he was in his.

CHAPTER XVII.

A STARTLING ANNOUNCEMENT.

"Ah, is that you, Chico?" the chieftain remarked, using the Indian language.

"Yes, it is I," the girl responded, her voice full and clear as befitted the daughter of such a brawny-chested father.

"Place the fox-tail without, Chico."

The girl took the fox's brush, which had once been the ornament of a magnificent silver-gray animal, from the lodge-pole where it hung, and affixed it by means of a hook in its end to the outside wall of the wigwam near the door.

This was a sign that the chief did not wish to be disturbed, and only a matter of life and death would justify any one craving admittance when the fox's tail was displayed without.

"It is done, father," said the girl upon reëntering.

The old chief was lolling back upon a pile of buffalo-robies in an extremely easy and comfortable manner.

He rumbled for a moment in the pouch of undressed deerskin which hung at his girdle, and then drew forth a small key attached to a ribbon.

"It is yonder, under the bearskins," the great chief said as he handed the key to the girl.

She evidently knew what was wanted, for without any questions she threw the bearskins aside—almost the whole interior of the wigwam was covered with skins of various kinds, fairly carpeted, in fact—and revealed a small tin trunk such as are so common in England; boxes, they term them there.

This was the spoil, evidently, of some frontier raid; some English lad or lass, seeking to find a fortune in the New World, had been despoiled of his "box," and perhaps one of the flax-haired scalps which here and there appeared among the others which so plentifully adorned the center-pole of the wigwam, was torn from the head of the owner.

From the tin trunk, Chico took a bottle of whisky and a tin cup which she handed to the chief, whose deep-set eyes sparkled with delight as he looked upon the "fire-water" of the white-skin, the potent fluid which has done far more toward destroying the red-men of America than all the weapons of the pale-faced foes.

The chief gave a deep chuckle as he heard the liquor gurgle into the cup.

"Have some!" he exclaimed, handing the bottle to his daughter.

"No; too much burn!" she replied.

"The more burn the better; ugh!"

And he dispatched the potent liquor at a swallow.

"Some sweet fire-water there such as the pale-face women drink," he continued, thus displaying the true instinct of the genuine toper who dislikes to drink alone.

The Apache meant wine, and the girl, who was as fond of stimulants in her way as her father was in his, took a generous swallow of the wine, which was a Madeira, so old that every drop was almost worth its weight in gold.

This was the spoils of a raid on an old Spanish-American hacienda in Durango.

The girl took a good half-pint of the wine, and the rich fluid sent the blood dancing up into her cheeks and made her keen black eyes flash and sparkle, adding materially to her beauty.

She cast herself carelessly down upon the bearskins after locking the box, returning the key to her father and replacing the robes over the tin trunk, a wise precaution, for if it were known that the chief possessed such liquid treasures he would have been overrun with visitors.

The old chief glanced at his daughter with admiration as she reclined upon the bearskins, a very Cleopatra in her wild, savage beauty; it was, though, the beauty of the tiger; hid by the velvet paws were sharp nails which could rend and tear.

The girl's mother was a proud and haughty Spanish maid, who had been captured on her wedding-night by this ruthless marauder and borne away by him to his mountain home.

Force had made the girl his squaw, but she came of the old Spanish line whose blue blood, claiming direct descent from the great Champion of Bivar, could not brook to be the wife and slave of a brawny, brutal savage.

Neither captivity nor the lash could tame her spirit. For a year she was kept in close imprisonment, most of the time with her wrists bound so that she could neither harm herself nor others, but, in an unguarded hour, when her baby was some three months old, she succeeded in getting possession of a knife and at one fell swoop attempted to kill the author of her misery, her babe and herself.

The scar of the knife-thrust was yet on the broad breast of Serape Colorado, but, though believing himself to be mortally wounded, he grappled with the infuriated woman, and succeeded in keeping her from reaching the child, until assistance came; then the chief, weakened

from loss of blood, released his hold, and the desperate captive, perceiving that it was impossible to kill the child, drove the keen-edged hunting knife deep into her own bosom and died, another victim to the red butchers, who spare neither age nor sex in their merciless raids.

The child had been reared by the Indians, and grew to womanhood as wild and savage as though she had not a single drop of white blood in her veins.

But the red life-current of the haughty Spanish race was there though, and it made her a very princess among her red sisters.

True, she was the favorite child of one of the greatest warriors that the Apache nation had ever known; Serape Colorado fairly idolized the girl, and there was reason for the feeling, for most certainly there was not another maiden in the tribe who could compare with Chico Colorado, as she was called.

She was not only by far the best-looking of all the Indian maidens, but she was their superior in mental gifts.

Although as proud and haughty as the daughter of an empress, and as full of caprices as the daintiest dame that ever reigned as the "bright particular star" of a great city, yet she was wonderfully clear-headed, possessing great powers of penetration, and gifted with wisdom far beyond her years, and on many occasions she had astonished her father with counsel which he had followed to his profit.

As was natural under the circumstances there was hardly a brave in the tribe who did not aspire to win and wear the daughter of the great chief.

Not only was her hand sought in marriage by the young chiefs, but many of the old braves, prominent men who were looked upon as the pillars of the tribe, sought to take the Indian princess to wife, notwithstanding the fact that they were already provided with two or three squaws.

But proud and haughty as was the girl, yet she treated her suitors with wonderful kindness, considering how arrogant she was by nature, and although none of them could boast that he was more favored by the girl than any of the rest who sought to win her, there was hardly one of her suitors who did not believe that he stood as good a chance as any of his rivals.

From this fact it will be readily understood that the wily Indian maid had managed her love affairs with wonderful skill.

"What think you of these pale-faces whom we have taken?" the Apache chieftain asked.

"One of them looks to me as if he was a great brave," the girl replied.

"The young man?"

"Yes."

"The old one has been a great warrior," Serape Colorado observed. "Years ago he and the white chief, Kit Carson, did much mischief in the Apache-Land."

"He is too old now to be feared."

"Yes, and the Great Spirit has taken away his senses—he has become a prophet and can look into the future."

There was an incredulous look upon the face of the girl, and she pondered over the announcement for a few moments.

Then at last she shook her head.

"I do not believe it!" she exclaimed. "It is a pale-face trick! He is no prophet!"

"Say not so, Chico, for I, with my own eyes, witnessed his behavior when the Great Spirit whispered in his ears."

And then the old warrior, in the gravest manner possible, proceeded to relate how the aged mountain-man had acted.

The girl, though, despite the fact that in most all respects she was as thoroughly Indian as though there wasn't a drop of white blood in her veins, was not a prey to superstition, and she was not prepared to believe the "yarn" with which Dick Talbot had deceived the Apache chieftain.

"The white men are cunning," the girl remarked. "They can play the fox as well as the bear. They know that they are helpless in the hands of the red-men and they have devised this tale so as to save their lives."

"It is easily put to the test," the chief replied. "And if the white dogs have deceived me they shall die a death of lingering torture!"

And the brawny chieftain shook his clinched fist fiercely in the air.

"I think I am something of a prophet," the girl observed, in a dreamy way, a far-away look upon her handsome face.

The old chief watched her for a moment, and then he gravely nodded his head.

"Whether you are a prophet or not it is certainly true that the Great Spirit has gifted you with a wisdom such as seldom falls to the lot of a human," he remarked.

"Sometimes when I close my eyes the future seems to rise before me, and the voice of the Great Spirit whispers in my ears," the girl murmured, in a low tone, her brilliant orbs veiled by the dark lashes.

"Do you hear the voice now?" asked the Apache chieftain, anxiously.

"Yes."

"And what says the Great Spirit to his red daughter?"

"I am warned that this young white warrior is fated to bring ruin to the tribe of Serape Colorado unless he consents to forswear his race and become a red-man."

"He does it, or he dies!" exclaimed the Apache chieftain, in a tone full of determination.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A CUNNING SCHEME.

The girl remained silent for a few moments, her breath came hard and fast and it seemed as if she was about to faint.

The old chief watched her with anxious eyes.

Then, all of a sudden, she recovered and sat upright.

"Wah! the spell is over now!" she exclaimed. "The voice whispers no more in my ears and I am myself again."

"It is a strange warning," the Apache chief remarked, musingly. "It does not seem possible that this white brave, a helpless prisoner in our hands, should be able to do the red-men harm."

"True, but the ways of fate are strange, and it is not wise to disregard the warning of the Great Spirit," the girl replied.

"No, no, you are right, the warning must be heeded. The white warrior must join the red-men, or we will wet our knives in his heart's blood."

"Let me think for a moment!" the girl exclaimed. "The busy thoughts are pressing on my brain so that it seems as though my head would burst!"

And then for a few moments the girl buried her face in her hands, and the Apache chief watched her earnestly.

It was these peculiarities which had given Chico Colorado so strong a hold upon the worthless old warrior who regarded women generally as being but a little better than dogs.

Then at last the girl again looked Serape Colorado in the face and from the expression upon her features it was plain that her meditations had not been fruitless.

"I have hit upon a plan," she said.

"Speak, my daughter, your words are always full of wisdom," the old chief declared.

"You know that many great braves of the tribe seek me for their squaw?"

"And they are wise; what woman in all the Apache nation can compare with the daughter of Serape Colorado?"

"And the wooing has made bad blood among the warriors."

"It is true; the Gray Buffalo and the Painted Oak would fly at each other's throats like a pair of angry dogs if an opportunity occurred."

"These two are the most powerful warriors in the tribe after yourself."

"Yes, so powerful that some of their friends have dared to say that I am growing too old to lead the Apache warriors on the war-path and that I ought to retire in favor of one of them!" the great chief exclaimed, with an ugly scowl which clearly betrayed how unwelcome the idea was to him.

"Yes, I have heard such whispers, and if either one of them thought he was strong enough he would make the attempt to compel you to give place to him."

"I am not so old as to be afraid to meet either one of them in single fight!" Serape Colorado announced, proudly.

"The great chief of the Apache nation should not condescend to meet any warrior of the tribe in single fight, no matter how great the warrior may be," the girl declared.

"True, but rather than bear the taunts of the braves I will do it."

Circumstances had not been favorable to the chief for some time. Three expeditions planned and led by Serape Colorado had resulted disastrously, and this had caused murmurs of discontent to arise, and the friends of the young braves had taken advantage of the fact to suggest that Serape Colorado ought to retire in favor of some younger man.

And this, too, was a reason why the braves were so anxious to serve Chico Colorado.

The man who obtained the girl would be most likely to succeed the old chief.

The Apache chieftain understood this well enough, and he was opposed to the girl bestowing her hand upon either the Gray Buffalo or the Painted Oak, for he anticipated that the moment his daughter became the squaw of either brave, he, and his friends, would make a strong effort to get him to resign in favor of the successful suitor.

"It will not be necessary," Chico replied.

"My plan will, I think, dispose of both the men who aspire to succeed you."

"Let me hear it!" exclaimed the father, eagerly.

"First, you must see this white brave—tell him that his life is forfeited, and that a horrid death at the stake awaits him for his intrusion into the country of the red-men."

The old chief nodded, and a grim smile came over his face; the thought of such a scene was pleasant to him.

"Then ask the pale-face what he will give for his life."

"In such a situation a man would be apt to be willing to agree to almost anything," Serape Colorado remarked.

The old chieftain spoke from experience. He had been captured once by the blue-coated, pale-face warriors, and for a time the chances seemed excellent that the red marauder would ornament the branch of some tree, suspended thereto by a rope, and in order to save his neck, the dusky captive had eaten humble-pie and agreed to all sorts of conditions, but the moment he succeeded in obtaining his liberty and found himself back in Apache-Land with his red brothers again, he promptly repudiated all his promises.

"You will tell him that report declares he is a great warrior, and that you are curious to know whether it is true or not."

"The old man has been a great chief, but of this man I know nothing."

"Father, unless I miss my guess, he is the greatest white warrior that ever set foot in the Apache-Land!" the girl declared, with an earnestness which astonished the chief.

"It may be possible; he is built like a warrior."

"And being desirous of learning whether he is as great a warrior as report declares, you will give him a chance for his life on these conditions; he is to meet in single fight all the Apache braves, one after the other, who desire to test his skill and bravery. If he succeeds in vanquishing the Apache chiefs, then his life will be spared, if he consents to join with us, and become an Apache brave."

"No doubt he will be glad of the chance," Serape Colorado observed, with an approving nod.

"And now comes the trick to rid you of these two braves who are so anxious to become the great chief of the Apache nation."

"I will summon the Gray Buffalo and the Painted Oak, and will say to them that I will become the squaw of the man who kills the pale face in a fair fight; they must draw lots to decide who first shall encounter him."

"Yes, yes," and Serape Colorado nodded his head sagely. "But suppose the first man kills the pale-face?"

"He will not!" exclaimed the girl in the most confident manner. "The Great Spirit has whispered to me that the warrior lives not in the Apache tribe who can conquer this white man!"

The old chieftain shook his head a little doubtfully.

Despite the strong assertion, he did not feel positive in regard to this point.

"You will see that I am correct," the girl asserted. "This white man is a great warrior, and at any cost he must become an Apache. I will pledge myself to become the squaw of the brave who succeeds in killing him in a fair and open fight."

"Yes, but if he proves the victor?—for if he kills two men like the Gray Buffalo and the Painted Oak, it is not likely that any other warrior will dare to encounter him."

"Then I will be his squaw, and that will bind him firmly to us," the girl replied, promptly.

The old warrior surveyed the girl for a moment, a grave look upon his face.

He understood now what had happened; the strange white man had caught the capricious fancy of the Indian princess, and she had set her wits to work to win him.

The scheme she had adopted was an ingenious one, and the more the old chief reflected upon the matter the better he liked it.

If it was successful, he would be rid of two dangerous rivals, and would gain a brave who would be far more apt to favor him than any one else.

"Be it so," he said at last. "The scheme seems to me to be a good one. I will see the white brave and make known the conditions to him."

"No!" exclaimed the girl, springing abruptly to her feet, "let me see the white chief—and talk with him!"

"As you please; it matters not."

"I will see if he is willing to make the trial, and if he is, the quicker the contest takes place the better."

"Yes," assented the chief.

After a few more words the girl departed on her mission.

"I bear a message from Serape Colorado to the white prisoners," she announced to the sentinels who guarded the wigwam where the captives were confined, and they made no objections to her entering.

The rawhide cords had been removed from the wrists of the prisoners, for the red-skins had no fear of their captives escaping.

The old mountain-man was in a deep slumber; the result of the unusual exertions which the fiery liquor he had drunk had caused him to make.

The others were reclining upon buffalo-ropes which had been thrown into the wigwam for their accommodation.

An expression of surprise appeared on the faces of the pair as the Indian princess strode

into the wigwam and, halting in its center, looked upon them with as haughty an air as though she was the heir of a great empire, instead of a daughter of a tribe of half-naked savages.

CHAPTER XIX.

A DISCOVERY.

CHICO COLORADO paid no attention to young Alva, but fixed her gaze intently upon Dick Talbot.

"The white brave is in the hands of his enemies," the Indian girl remarked.

"That is true enough," Talbot replied.

"Does he know that his life is not worth a copper coin?" she continued, speaking English as fluently as though it was her native tongue.

"Well, as far as that goes, desperate as is my situation, I don't think I would want to sell it even for a big stack of dollars," the adventurer replied, with his usual coolness.

"The white chief is a great brave?"

"Oh, I don't know; I am not the kind of man who cares to voice my own praise. All I have to say is that I usually manage to hold my own."

"Does the white chief know what is the fate of the pale-faces who are caught by the red-men in the Apache-Land?"

"No, I can't say that I do, but as there is no war at present—the white-skins and the reds being at peace—I suppose they are warned that their room is better than their company, and then they are dismissed with the injunction never to dare to intrude upon the Indian Territory again."

"Oh, no!" the girl exclaimed, scornfully. "The Apaches are not fools; for years they have been wronged by the miserable white men, and now when they catch a pale-face his doom is death—a terrible death by fire and torture, and the agony is so great that the fated man calls aloud for death to come and release him from his misery."

"You are trying a little of the torture business now, ain't you?" Talbot asked, quietly.

"What will you do to escape such a fate?"

Talbot did not betray any particular interest in the question, but the youth, Alva, did; he fixed his dark eyes inquiringly upon the face of the Indian girl and asked:

"Is there a chance that he may escape death, then?"

Chico Colorado turned her gaze slowly upon the face of the youth, when his deep tones reached her ears, and for a moment the two looked at each other; anxiety written upon one face, rage and hatred upon the other.

"Be silent! I spoke not to you!" the Indian princess exclaimed, disdainfully.

A gleam of fire shot from the eyes of the youth, his face hardened, and dark, ugly lines appeared about the mouth and eyes.

He did not say anything, though; only leaned listlessly back against the pile of skins.

Chico Colorado darted a final angry glance at the youth, and then turned to Talbot again.

"What say you? Do you wish to make an effort to escape the doom which is in store for you?"

"Most certainly; how can it be done?"

"Report declares that you are the greatest white brave who has ever set foot in the Apache-Land."

Talbot looked surprised.

"Really, now, you are putting it on a little too strong," he remarked. "Or, come to think of it, I reckon there is some mistake about this matter. You have got hold of the wrong man; I am not the fellow you take me to be at all."

The Indian girl shook her head.

"Oh, no, there is no mistake; you are the man."

"No, no; in private I don't mind admitting to you that I have a pretty good opinion of myself, but it is an utter impossibility for anybody up in this region to know whether I am a good man or not, for no one knows anything about me."

"Report says you are a great warrior, and I, Chico Colorado, the daughter of Serape Colorado, believe that it is true. Many braves in the Apache nation seek to make me their squaw, and as I care for none of the red warriors I have decided to allow the god of battles to settle the matter. The Apache brave who seeks me for his squaw must meet you in single fight; so upon your skill and bravery your life depends. If you conquer your opponents your life will be spared upon condition that you become an Apache."

"Aha! you want to make a red-skin out of me, eh?"

"Yes."

"And if one of the braves whips me you will become his squaw."

"Yes."

"But if I conquer all my men whose squaw will you be?"

"Yours!" replied the girl, promptly, and in the most matter-of-fact way.

An exclamation of disgust came from the lips of the youth, and the Indian princess turned upon him with all the fury of the tiger-cat.

"Wah! you do not like that, eh?" Chico cried, her face dark with passion.

"You will not die yet awhile; you will live—live to see this white-skin conquer the Apache warriors and then become an Apache himself!"

"What do I care?" the youth exclaimed, disdainfully.

"You will care before I am through with you!" the Indian girl retorted.

And then, turning abruptly to Talbot, she said:

"Will you make the trial?"

"Oh, yes; all that a man hath will he give for his life," responded the sport. "And although I cannot say that I am hankering after a chance to either kill any of your red chiefs, or to be killed by one of them, yet as I am in a hole, with no perceptible chance to get out, I must make the best of it."

"You will have to meet the red chiefs with their own weapons, for you will not be allowed a choice," the Indian princess remarked, and she looked at the adventurer inquiringly, just as if she was afraid that this condition would not be agreeable to him.

"Oh, that is all right," Talbot replied, understanding at once the meaning of the expression in her dark eyes. "It does not make any difference to me about the weapons. I had just as lief give them the choice of tools as to have it myself. I have done some extensive traveling in the wilds of the West, and I reckon it will bother any of the men of your tribe to pick out a weapon with which I am not familiar."

The Indian princess nodded her head in an approving manner.

"It is good," she said. "To-morrow the contest will take place, and if you are as good a warrior as I believe, there is a future before you such as any Apache brave would be glad to know awaited him."

And with this assurance the Indian princess took her departure.

"Well, this is about the oddest circumstance that ever occurred to me," Talbot remarked, in a cautious tone, to the youth.

Being afraid that listeners might be near, he pitched his voice so that it could not be heard but by the one to whom the words were addressed.

"Yes, and it is so entirely unexpected," the youth replied, in the same cautious tone.

"It beats me, and yet I have had some remarkably queer adventures since I struck this Western land."

"It is a high honor that the Apache princess proposed to bestow upon you," Alva remarked, sarcastically, and upon the face of the youth was a look of supreme contempt.

"Yes, according to her ideas it is."

"How is it in yours?" the youth asked, abruptly.

"The prospect is not a pleasing one to me," Talbot answered, both face and voice grave.

"I know something of the Indian mode of existence, for in my early life I lived with the red-men, and to all outward seeming was as dusky a brave as the tribe could boast."

The youth listened with interest, a peculiar gleam in his dark eyes.

"The Indians of whom I speak were not Apaches, though, but a Californian tribe, to my thinking, a far nobler race of red-men, and if in time I tired of wild life and barbarous ways, it goes without saying that I would never be contented to dwell here with these red thieves and butchers."

"I accept the terms offered because it gives me a chance for my life. If I am lucky enough to prove the victor in the contests I shall take pains to pull the wool over the eyes of the Apaches until I get a chance to make my escape."

"You do not then return the passion which this Indian princess evidently feels for you?"

"Oh, no!"

"And yet she is a handsome creature."

"Yes, good-looking enough, as far as that goes; far better-looking than the average of Indian girls, but I do not think she is a pure Apache; she is too light-colored."

"I have heard that she is the daughter of a white girl whom Serape Colorado captured in Mexico," and then the youth related the sad story of the abducted Spanish-Mexican girl.

"I suspected something of the kind," the sport remarked. "She is evidently far superior to the common run of Indian girls."

"And do you not think that in time you can learn to be content with the love of such a woman?" the youth asked.

"Oh, no," Talbot replied; "if I should live to be a hundred years old I could never bring myself to fall in love with this dusky princess. Besides, I am not that kind of a man, anyway, be the color of the woman what it may. I am bad medicine to the softer sex; few girls in this life have I ever fancied that I did not bring evil to, not but what I would have laid down my life for them, but fate decreed that their association with me should be calamitous. Only one woman, so far, has escaped, but what the future may have in store for her it is of course impossible to tell."

At this point the entrance of an old squaw with a supply of provender put a stop to the conversation.

From the prisoners, Chico Colorado went straight to her father.

"He accepts!" she cried, "and now I crave a favor. Give me the third prisoner—the white youth!"

The old chief looked amazed at the request.

CHAPTER XX.

A STORMY INTERVIEW.

SERAPE COLORADO pondered over the matter for a moment before he made any reply, then he said, slowly:

"You wish the third prisoner?"

"Yes, the youth."

The chieftain shook his head.

"I am afraid that I cannot grant the request."

"Why not?" cried the girl, her dark eyes flashing fire; she was evidently annoyed by the refusal.

"The old man is a prophet and this youth is the one who has the power to make him reveal the truths that the Great Spirit whispers in his ears."

Now, although the Indian princess had very little faith in regard to the old white scout being a seer, yet she was too shrewd to express her doubts, for she saw that her father was inclined to believe the statement, and when he gave his reason for not wanting to turn the youth over to her, she was cunning enough to use it to her purpose.

"Yes, I know that," she said, "and that is why I wish to take charge of the youth."

"Ah, I see," and the old chief nodded his head. "You think you can learn something from him?"

"Yes," responded the girl, inwardly chuckling at the way in which the old chief had walked into the snare.

"The idea is a good one," Serape Colorado observed with an approving air. "You shall have the youth, and be sure to use all possible efforts to induce the white-skin to reveal to you how the old man can be persuaded to commune with the Great Spirit."

"You may rest assured I will do my best."

Satisfied with this declaration, Serape Colorado gave orders to have the youth conveyed to a vacant wigwam situated by the side of the one occupied by the girl; then Chico departed, a satisfied look upon her dark face, and with a gleam in her eyes that boded no good to the prisoner.

At the Indian princess's suggestion the youth's wrists were bound with thongs of rawhide, and his ankles were also served in the same manner after he was placed in the wigwam.

This was done so as to avoid having to place a guard upon the lodge, for, as the Indian princess observed to the old chief, it was important that there should be no listeners to the revelation which she thought she could induce the pale-face to make.

This seemed right and proper to the great chief, and so he had given orders to have the captive secured as Chico desired.

By this time twilight was at hand, but the girl waited for some three hours before she entered the wigwam where Alva had been placed, which was in utter darkness.

Chico had foreseen that such would be the case, and was provided with an Indian torch, mainly composed of buffalo tallow, and this, after being ignited, gave ample light.

The wigwam was a small one and all that was within it was a bed of pine boughs over which a buffalo-robe was spread; on this the white captive reclined, and on the opposite side of the lodge was a similar couch; upon this the Indian princess seated herself, after having lighted the torch.

There was a gleam of triumph in her dark eyes as she gazed upon the bound and helpless captive.

"Wah! do you understand that it is to me you are indebted for this?" Chico asked, openly displaying her exultation.

"I suspected it from the first," the captive replied, calmly, not betraying any signs of excitement.

"I delayed coming to see you for a few hours so that you might have time to reflect."

"I understand that, too," the other rejoined. "You are fully as fiendish by nature as any of the red butchers of the Apache nation, and from them the prairie wolves might take a lesson in ferocity."

"And do you not tremble when you think that you are here helpless in my power?" the Indian princess demanded.

The youth shook his head, a disdainful expression on his dark features.

An angry gleam appeared in the eyes of Chico.

"Perhaps you do not understand how utterly helpless you are!" she exclaimed.

"Oh, yes, I understand, but I do not tremble. Why should I? You can but kill—your power does not extend beyond death."

"Ah, but it does!" the Indian girl responded, a malignant smile playing upon her features. "True, my power to injure you stops when I deal the blow which steals your life away, but will it not add to the pangs of death for you to know that this great white brave is to share

my wigwam—that he is to be mine for all time to come?"

"What does it matter to me?"

The question was put quietly enough, but there was a glint of fire in the eyes of Alva which belied the words.

"Ah, that blow goes home to your heart, does it not?" the Indian girl cried, in fierce exultation. "You may put on a bold face, but I know that the poisoned shaft has wounded you deeply, and that the more you reflect upon the matter, the greater will be the pain."

"Are you dull enough to believe that I have not penetrated your secret?" the Apache princess demanded, abruptly. "If so, you are not as shrewd as I believed you to be. If I did not understand exactly who and what you are, do you think I would take all this trouble?"

The captive shook his head.

"That is something I have not troubled my mind about," he replied.

"I have asked my father to give you to me, and he consented, although at first he was not willing to agree to it, for his mind was full of the strange story that the great white brave told him in regard to your father being a prophet, and you the interpreter—who alone could translate the words which the Great Spirit whispered in his ear."

"It was a cunning trick, but though it deceived my father and his Apache braves, it has not blinded me. I know that it is all a lie! Your father is no prophet—the Great Spirit does not whisper in his ear, and if you say you receive a message from the Great Spirit through him, it is but a device to blind our eyes. If your father is a prophet, why does he not call upon the Great Spirit to aid him now?"

"Be patient; the Great Spirit is not to be hurried, and the blow will fall when you least expect it."

The Indian girl laughed outright.

"Oh, you must not think that I am a child to be frightened by any such tale!" Chico declared. "But if you believe that by summoning the Great Spirit you can bring him to your aid, then the quicker you set about it the better, for I tell you, frankly, that you have not many minutes of life left."

"When my time comes I will die, and not before," the captive replied.

"I begin to think that you do not believe that I am in earnest!" the Apache princess exclaimed angrily. "If that is so, you never made a greater mistake in your life. Remember how you are situated! You are here alone in this lodge, remote from all the others, my own excepted, no guard near, no one to pay any attention to what may go on in this place. You are securely bound, so as to be unable to protect yourself, and there is not anything to prevent me from sheathing my knife in your heart. Then, when your death-struggles are over, I shall remove the bands which confine your limbs, and say that you contrived to free yourself, and in order to prevent your escape I used my knife!"

"What do you think of my plan? Is it not a good one?" and as she put the question, the Indian girl burst into a loud laugh.

An expression of cold disdain appeared on the face of the youth, but he spoke not.

The Apache princess waited for a few moments, and then finding that the captive was not disposed to speak, she said:

"You are silent; your rage is so great, no doubt, that you cannot put it into words. This is my moment of triumph—more so even than the one when I shall plunge my keen-edged knife to your heart!"

"Your disguise is a wonderful one, but not good enough to deceive my eyes, although I doubt if I would have discovered your secret had you not betrayed your interest in the great white brave by speaking as you did, when I made known to him that there was a chance to save his life by becoming an Apache and taking me for his squaw."

"You are no boy, but a woman, as I am—you love the great white brave—you are my rival, and therefore I will kill you!"

The captive quailed not, but looked the Apache princess firmly in the eye.

"You are right; I am a woman, but the white chief is nothing to me nor I to him," was the reply.

The supposed youth, Alva, was indeed a woman, but being extremely masculine in her appearance and having never worn anything but a boy's dress for many years, her disguise was so perfect that it almost defied detection.

"Ah, now you are trying to deceive me!" the Indian girl exclaimed, quickly. "You think by uttering a lie to persuade me that you are not my rival, and so hope to induce me to spare you."

"I am speaking only the truth when again I say I am nothing to this man nor is he aught to me," the captive responded, quietly. "He does not even know that I am a woman, but supposes me to be one of his own sex."

"It is a lie—I know it is a lie!" Chico Colorado declared, fiercely, her angry vehemence a strange contrast to the calmness of the white girl.

"You are his squaw, or else you would never have assumed this disguise and followed his foot-

steps to Apache-Land; but you have come to your death! You shall not live to hope to rival Chico Colorado. The great white brave is mine, and I am ready to kill a hundred pale-faced squaws before I give him up. I will slay all who stand between me and my chief, and you will be the first!"

By this time the Apache princess had wrought herself into a violent fit of anger, and drawing her knife she rushed at the captive.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE APACHE PRINCESS IS SURPRISED.

APPARENTLY nothing but a miracle could save Annis Kruger—for so the captive was named—from the knife of the Indian girl.

Bound and helpless, what resistance could she offer to the attack of the infuriated Indian princess?

So the Apache girl had calculated, and the thought that the captive would be able to offer any defense never entered her head.

Annis was reclining upon the rude couch, both wrists and ankles securely bound with stout rawhide cords, apparently, but, as the Indian girl rushed upon her with the uplifted knife, she suddenly sprang to her feet, the rawhide thongs dropped from her person, and, with a grip of iron, she seized with her left hand the right wrist of Chico Colorado, at the same time encircling the throat of the Indian girl with the strong fingers of her right hand.

When the Apache warriors had told her that she must submit to be bound, a presentiment of evil had immediately entered her mind, and when she held up her wrists to the chief who had been instructed to attend to the binding process, she cunningly contrived to hold them in such a way that the chief was not able to tie them tightly, but the trick was so artfully performed that the savage was not conscious that anything was wrong; then, too, the warrior was not particularly careful about the matter, for he did not consider the youth to be anything of a brave.

During the hours that elapsed between the departure of the warriors and the coming of the Apache princess, the captive had worked diligently with her teeth at the knots which held the cords around her wrists.

Thanks to the looseness of the thongs, she succeeded in undoing the knots.

Then, when her wrists were once free, it was not a difficult task to remove the cords from her ankles.

But, after obtaining her liberty, she was cunning enough to replace the cords so that without a close inspection it was not possible for any one to discover that the fastenings had been tampered with.

Annis Kruger was remarkably muscular, far more so than the rather slender Apache princess, and as from an early age she had worn boy's clothing, and led the open-air life of a boy, in a hand-to-hand contest she was a good match for an average man.

Chico Colorado was taken entirely by surprise; she came to a halt upon coming within striking distance, and this was the moment that the captive selected for her attack.

Over backward went the Indian girl, borne down by the sudden leap of her foe.

She came to the ground with great force, Annis Kruger adding her own weight to the violence of the fall.

At the same moment, by a dextrous twist of the wrist, the knife of the Apache princess had been forced from her hand.

Chico Colorado had been half stunned by the shock, for the back of her head had struck the hard earth with great force, and she could not cry out to give an alarm, for the strong fingers of the white girl clasped her throat so tightly that it was not possible for her to utter a sound.

Although half unconscious, she struggled desperately, for her rage was great; to add to it came the thought that all the precautions which she had adopted so that she might be able to kill the white girl without the possibility of any one interfering, would aid the captive.

Even if she was able to give an alarm, the chances were great that no one would hear it, for she had arranged it in that way.

Desperate as were the struggles of the Indian girl, she was unable to release herself from the powerful grasp of her antagonist.

As unrelenting as death itself, Annis Kruger clung to the Apache princess. If her fingers had been made of iron, they could not have clutched the throat of the Indian girl more firmly.

Little by little Chico Colorado was choked into insensibility.

Her struggles grew fainter, her breath came thick and hard; physically she was no match for her strong-limbed assailant, and the more desperately she struggled the quicker her strength became exhausted.

At last she lay quite still; the contest was ended, and she had been choked into insensibility.

The captive waited for a few moments after the Indian princess ceased to struggle, so as to be sure that she really was insensible, and not pretending to be, so as to secure a release from

her dangerous position, then Annis rose to a kneeling position, looked for a moment into the face of her foe, and a plan of escape flashed into her mind.

In such moments of peril the mind usually works clearly, and it did not take the girl long to decide upon what was best to be done under the circumstances.

She stripped the gaudy Indian costume from the Apache princess, then removed her own garments, and dressed Chico Colorado in them, and bound her wrists and ankles tightly together with the rawhide ropes.

With the keen-edged hunting-knife of the Apache girl she cut a piece from the buffalo-robe, and arranged it as a gag in the mouth of Chico, tying it firmly.

This done, she took the insensible Indian maid in her strong arms and placed her upon the couch which she had occupied.

She arranged the Indian princess upon the couch in such a way that her head was nearly all hidden by the folds of buffalo-robe, and the fact that she was gagged could only be discovered upon close examination.

This job was performed so skillfully that it would have been a pair of sharp eyes indeed which could have detected that the form upon the skin couch was not that of the white captive.

After having thus disposed of her conquered foe, Annis proceeded to array herself in the garments which she had taken from the person of the Apache princess.

And when she was dressed she did not look unlike Chico, although she was considerably stouter, a little lighter in color, and her hair, although fully as dark as that which adorned the head of the Indian maid, was short, and curled in little crisping ringlets all over her head, instead of streaming down her back in long braids after the Indian fashion.

After placing the fanciful headdress of the Apache princess upon her own dark locks, Annis reflected for a moment.

"The headdress conceals my hair," she murmured, "but the absence of the long braids will be sure to betray me to the first warrior I meet."

Then an idea came into her mind, and the thought caused a smile of satisfaction to appear on her face.

"The idea is a good one," she observed; "it will secure me from observation, and at the same time inflict a blow upon this haughty Indian princess which she will be apt to remember for some time."

Annis was a true woman, despite the fact that she had masqueraded for so many years in male attire, and it was with a deal of satisfaction that with the knife of Chico Colorado she severed the long braids of raven-black hair which was the particular pride of the Indian girl.

"She will miss and mourn these braids almost as much as a warrior would the loss of his scalp-lock," Annis remarked, as she proceeded to affix them to the head-dress.

This was soon accomplished, and when she again donned the head-covering, the long braids came out from under it, and floated down her back in an extremely natural manner.

"It is a desperate venture," the white girl murmured, as she drew the Indian blanket closely around her so as to conceal the knife which she grasped, ready for use, in her right hand. "I must manage to escape now, for if I am captured my life will hang on an extremely slender thread; the Apache princess will be wild with rage when she discovers what I have done. My attack on her might be forgiven, but the robbery of her braids is an outrage for which my death alone can atone. True, I have been merciful and refrained from killing her, as I might easily have done, but in her rage at the loss of her cherished braids she will not be apt to consider that, so at all hazards I must escape, for my death is certain if I am recaptured."

The girl went to the door of the wigwam and looked out upon the night.

There was no moon, for it did not rise until late, but the stars were out in full force, and the night was not a dark one, so that there was plenty of light to serve the fugitive's purpose.

It was after eleven, and about all the Indians had retired to rest.

Feeling perfectly secure against an attack no sentinels were posted, and as far as the captive could see there was nothing to hinder her escape.

"I must get the dog, if possible," Annis murmured, as she stepped from the wigwam into the open air.

She conjectured that Jerusalem would be tied in the neighborhood of the corral, which she had noticed was in the upper end of the valley, so she proceeded in that direction.

With the blanket closely wrapped around her, and with her head sunk upon her breast as though she was deep in meditation, Annis walked toward the corral.

Luckily for the captive, the Apache princess was in the habit of taking solitary walks at unseemly hours, so the few that saw the girl paid no attention to her.

She reached the corral, but saw no signs of

the dog; disappointed, but fearing to look longer for him, she kept on up the valley, and soon passed out of the Indian village.

A surprise awaited her.

A few hundred paces beyond the village Jerusalem made his appearance from under the boughs of a scrubby pine.

To his collar was attached a piece of rawhide rope. He had been tied, but gnawed himself loose, and then hid himself to wait for his friends.

"Now, doggie, upon our skill and cunning our lives depend!" Annis cried.

CHAPTER XXII.

AN UNEXPECTED ENCOUNTER.

ANNIS proceeded with rapid steps, the dog trotting along by her side.

It was her idea to keep to the valley until she came to the rocky, broken country at its upper end, and then she intended to strike off to the eastward, keeping to the rocks as much as possible so as not to leave a trail behind her which the red-skins would be able to easily follow.

Like the majority of people who lead a lonely life amid the solitudes of the great wildernesses of the West, the girl was given to putting her thoughts into words, conversing with herself for want of some one else to talk to.

On this occasion though, Annis had the dog for a companion, and so to the brute she addressed her conversation.

"Well, Jerusalem, we must look to Heaven for aid and assistance this time," she remarked in low, cautious tones, so as not to attract attention if any one should happen to be lurking in the neighborhood. But she could not refrain from speaking; her head was so full that she felt she must give utterance to some of the busy thoughts which pressed so heavily upon her brain or she would go mad.

"Here we are, all alone in the desolate wilderness of the Apache Land, many miles from any civilized habitation," she continued. "No food, and no weapon with which food may be procured, for a hunting-knife under such circumstances is of little more use than a stick. No means of making a fire even if we should be lucky enough to secure game. That would not bother you much, you dear old dog, but I, being a human, am not used to taking my food raw, but rather than starve I am afraid I should become as big a brute as you are, for raw meat will help to sustain life, of course, but the meal, I fear, would be an extremely disagreeable one."

And the girl made a grimace at the thought.

"But I am counting my chickens before they are hatched," she added after a moment's reflection.

"The chances are a thousand to one that we will not be able to obtain any food, unless heaven in its mercy works something very much like a miracle in our favor, and I am sadly afraid the days of miracles are past."

At this point her reflections were interrupted by a low growl from the dog, and from the peculiar way in which the beast uttered the growl the girl understood that he had scented a red-skin.

The girl came to a halt; for a moment she was undecided what to do.

The brute indicated that the Indian was directly in front of her, and if she went on she would surely encounter him; but then if he was approaching—and the chances were that he was—if she retreated that movement would be sure to awaken his suspicions, the moment he caught sight of her, which he would be sure to do when he emerged from amid the rocks and trees which now concealed him.

"The dog!" she muttered, "he must not see the dog for that would be certain to excite his suspicions."

Then, parting the branches of a clump of pines at her elbow, she directed Jerusalem to conceal himself, and the sagacious brute, who appeared to understand almost everything which was said to him, hid amid the pines.

Hardly had the dog disappeared when a brawny Apache warrior came in sight.

He had been absent on a hunting expedition, evidently, for a double-barreled shot-gun reposed in the hollow of his arm, and a string of various kinds of game was strung across his back.

He uttered an exclamation of surprise and delight as he caught sight of the girl, and at once hastened toward her.

The girl's heart was in her mouth, as the saying is, for if he came near enough there was hardly a doubt that he would discover the imposture.

So the girl, with a majestic movement of the arm, waved the warrior back, and then, turning abruptly to the west, she strode across the valley.

The Apache brave came to a halt, astonished at the forbidding motion, but, to use the slang of the whites, he was a "cheeky" fellow, and although not a particularly distinguished warrior, yet he was one of the dandies of the tribe, and because Chico Colorado, in her endeavor to treat her suitors so that no one of them could boast that he was more favored than the rest, had not absolutely snubbed him, he had got the

idea into his head that the Indian princess looked with a particularly favorable eye upon his suit, and therefore, now that he had an opportunity to tell the girl how much he loved her, without danger of anybody interrupting the avowal, he did not feel at all disposed to allow the chance to go by without improving it. After hesitating a moment, he set out to follow the retreating footsteps of the supposed Chico Colorado.

"Oh, stay, flower of all the Apache-Land!" he exclaimed, in the fanciful fashion of the red-skins, speaking in the Indian tongue. "Listen to the voice of one who loves you as the sun loves the earth! The Little Brown Bear, great brave, as wise as the fox and fierce as the eagle, but his lodge is lonely, and will be until the sweet song-bird of the Apache tribe decides to come and gladden it with her presence."

Disgusted indeed was the disguised girl as she listened to this speech, of which however she did not understand a single word, for she was not familiar with the Indian language, but from the earnest way in which the warrior spoke she conjectured that it would be no easy matter to get rid of him.

The attempt must be made, though, and so again she waved her arm and motioned him to keep away.

The brave hesitated for a moment, for the gesture was a commanding one, and it was impossible for him to mistake its meaning, but his pride was roused, for he did not relish being treated in such a manner, and again he hastened forward, determined to overtake the girl and ask her to explain why she treated him so contemptuously.

Annis was walking with slow and dignified steps, so as not to excite suspicion, but when she heard the Indian hastening after her, she guessed that it was his purpose to force her to speak, and if this was correct, discovery was certain.

Even if her disguise was so perfect as to deceive the warrior when he came near to her, she could not speak a word in the Indian language, and this would surely lead to the detection of the cheat.

It was a moment of great peril.

She still had the unsheathed knife of the Apache princess in her hand, and she made up her mind to use it rather than allow herself to be recaptured, for then her death was certain.

"Treat not with such cold disdain the brave whose greatest wish is to bask in the sunlight of your smile!" the warrior cried. "Turn and speak to me, peerless Apache flower, for I thirst for a word from your lips as the parched deer wandering over a sunburnt prairie thirsts for the cooling waters of the mountain brook."

Again with a dignified wave of the hand the girl motioned the warrior to keep away, and with the other Annis clutched the long hunting-knife still tighter.

But the young warrior was determined to have speech with the girl, and would not be denied.

In his judgment the moment was propitious, and he had made up his mind she must give him an answer.

Her behavior he believed to be but maiden coyness, and in his vanity he thought that if he insisted upon her giving him a decided answer, it would be a favorable one.

He hastened forward and placed his hand upon her shoulder; Annis had not dared to quicken her pace, for fear that the warrior's suspicions might be awakened, and she knew that if a contest could not be avoided, it would be decidedly to her advantage to take the brave by surprise.

As the reader has probably seen, the wild life which the girl had led from infancy had partially unsexed her, and in such an emergency as this she could be depended upon to act with all a man's energy.

She knew that to prevent the warrior from giving an alarm, which, in the stillness of the night, might reach the Indian camp, she must take him by surprise, and she had resolved, when he reached her side, to deal him a knife-thrust which would be apt to close his account with this world.

But the fugitive was spared the trouble, for the moment the warrior placed his hand upon her shoulder, the bull-dog, who had been creeping along with noiseless footsteps in the rear of the Apache, growled.

The warrior turned in alarm and clutched his gun.

But the moment the hostile motion was made, the dog, who was crouching like a tiger, ready for a spring, leaped at the throat of the savage, and the force of the unexpected attack caused the chief to lose his balance, and he went sprawling over on his back.

The gun was forced from his hand; small loss, though, for it was of no use to him in a struggle of this kind, and with his hands he endeavored to loosen the terrible grip which the dog had taken on his throat.

Vain were his struggles, for the beast held on as tightly as though his jaws were of iron.

The Apache chief beat the air with his hands,

the agonies of death were upon him; the brawny warrior who had during his ruthless career slain many unfortunate pale-faces, without heeding their prayers for mercy, was now himself fanned by the cold, dark wings of the grim destroyer.

The end soon came; the stout limbs grew still; the warrior had gone to the happy hunting-grounds.

Now the way of escape seemed open, for here were arms and ammunition; a flint and steel, by means of which fires could be kindled; and, in addition, the pouch of the brave was well filled with "jerked" venison and parched corn.

"Now glory to the Lord who has wrought this miracle!" Annis exclaimed, with a thankful heart, when she made the discovery.

Thus provided, she felt sure of escaping.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE ORDEAL.

It really seemed as if Providence had determined that the girl should escape from her enemies, for her absence was not discovered until the next morning; then the Apache chieftain, Serape Colorado, having been troubled with ugly dreams during the night—a result due more to the vast quantity of fire-water which he had drunk before retiring to rest than to any other cause—sought his daughter to ask her opinion in regard to the matter, for the ruthless red warrior was extremely superstitious, and, like Shakespeare's Richard the Third, he might cry, "Dreams have struck more terror to my soul than could the substance of ten thousand men."

Not finding the Indian princess in her wigwam, search was made for her, and soon she was discovered and released from her extremely unpleasant situation.

Chico raged like a fury when she recovered her liberty.

She was stiff and sore, for the white girl had not been gentle with her, and after being released it was some minutes before she recovered the use of her limbs.

The old chief was as enraged as his daughter at the outrage, and, summoning his warriors, he hastened to pursue the fugitive.

Again Heaven interposed its protecting hand.

During the night a heavy rain had fallen, so that the trail of the white-skin had been obliterated, and, after spending a whole day in the search, the Apaches, not being able to find the least trace of the fugitive, gave up the pursuit in disgust.

One thing only consoled the Indian princess: the white chief, whom she believed to be the lover of the disguised girl, was in her power, and if she could not capture the pale-face, she could tear her very heart by taking the man whom she loved.

The Indian maid was a wily schemer, and she did not reveal to her father the discovery which she had made in regard to the sex of the disguised girl, for she reasoned that if the secret was known, the old chief, who was noted for his fondness for white squaws, might take it into his head to spare the life of the girl, and Chico thirsted for her death.

The escape of the fugitive though denied the girl the vengeance which she sought.

That night a grand council was held, and the Apache chieftain made known to the tribe the decision to which his daughter had come.

It was a complete surprise, but the majority of the braves thought that it was a good idea, and all the suitors for the hand of the Indian princess vied with each other in declaring their readiness to meet the white chief.

But the Apache chieftain settled this point in a very few words.

"Among all the braves of the Apache nation who have honored Chico Colorado with their admiration, there are two to whom her heart warms more than to the rest," Serape Colorado declared. "And those two braves are warriors whose deeds have made them renowned, and it is my daughter's desire that these two great chiefs shall be the first to encounter the pale-face. If they fall in the fight then others can step forward."

"The two braves to whom I refer are the Gray Buffalo and the Painted Oak."

The warriors, who sat in the council, looked at each other after this announcement was made.

It was well known that as fighting men the Gray Buffalo and Painted Oak had no superiors in the tribe, and if neither one of them succeeded in conquering the white man, it was not likely that any of the other braves would be able to accomplish the feat.

Promptly the two warriors rose to their feet, one after the other, and announced their willingness to undertake the task.

Then it was suggested by Serape Colorado that the two draw lots so as to decide which would be the one to first encounter the stranger.

This was acceptable to the pair, and the ceremony was immediately performed.

The Gray Buffalo was the winner, much to the disappointment of the Painted Rock, for these red warriors had so much confidence in

their own prowess that they felt certain that the white chief stood no chance in the contest.

Then the Apache chieftain informed the warrior that he was at liberty to select the weapons which were to be used in the fight, and the brave, without a moment's hesitation, replied that his hunting-knife was all he cared to use.

In the use of a knife he was supposed to be without an equal in the tribe, and this was principally due to the fact that he had once slain a huge black bear with his steel; the teeth and claws of the beast, arranged as a necklace, ornamented his person.

It was arranged that the contest was to take place on the following day and then the council broke up.

The Apache princess sought the lodge where Talbot was held captive, and made known to him what had been decided upon.

"Can you use a knife with the hand of a warrior?" the Indian girl asked.

"I have had some little experience in that line," Talbot remarked, in his quiet way, apparently not at all affected by the gravity of the situation. "And I reckon I can do about as well with a knife as any other weapon that could be chosen."

"Do you prefer your own to any other knife?" the girl asked.

"Oh, yes, it is an extra good tool; far superior to the common run of knives."

"I will see that you have it then; be on the alert to do your best, for the Gray Buffalo is a mighty warrior with the knife. When you meet him you will see around his neck a ring of teeth and claws, which he took from the largest bear which any one ever saw in the Apache Land, after he had killed him with a knife-thrust which cut the animal's heart in twain."

"I shall have to look out for myself then, as I may lose my teeth and claws," the adventurer remarked.

The Indian princess knitted her brows; the coolness which the white-skin displayed puzzled her.

Did it proceed from the knowledge that he was a mighty man with the knife, or was it the bravado of ignorance?

"Would you avoid this fight if you could?" she asked, abruptly.

Talbot laughed.

"Oh, come now, you must not ask questions!" he exclaimed. "Particularly useless ones of that kind. I have got to fight, or else be killed—tortured to death, probably—by your red brothers, and under the circumstances there is hardly a man in the world who would not fight to the last gasp, so let that content you. When I face your Apache warrior, I shall do my best to kill him, and if I don't succeed it will be because he is a better man than I am."

The Apache princess did not know exactly what to make of Talbot.

About all the white men whom she had encountered, claiming to be warriors, had always been loud talkers; fellows who, with many words, bragged of what they could do, the half-horse, half-alligator breed, and so Talbot, with his quiet way, was a puzzle to her.

Possibly because the adventurer was so different from any white man whom she had ever met, was why she had been attracted to him.

A few words of caution she spoke, again reciting that the warrior whom he was to encounter had never yet met his match, and that he must not throw a chance away, then took her departure.

The old mountain-man had listened to the conversation, although he made believe he was asleep, being extended on the couch of skins when the girl entered the apartment, and after her departure, he observed:

"I wonder wot on 'arth the red niggers have done with Alva?"

"I cannot guess; I had half a mind to ask the girl, but upon second thoughts concluded not to do so, for I had a suspicion that she would not be apt to give me any information."

"Like as not, but I hope no harm has come to him."

Talbot had told the old scout of the yarn he had imposed on the red-skins, and so Kruger was prepared to play the madman.

The night passed slowly away; Talbot slept as sleeps the man whose mind is untroubled by the weight of care.

When the morning was well advanced, the Indians began to make preparations for the contest.

Every soul in the tribe, men, women and children, were present.

Guards were posted, so that it would not be possible for the white man by any bold dash to gain his liberty, and the rest squatted upon the turf, forming a circle about a hundred feet in diameter.

The Gray Buffalo, naked to the waist, with an eight-inch bowie-knife clasped in his hand, entered the circle.

A few minutes after Talbot and the old mountain-man were brought under guard to the meeting-place.

Kruger had sent a request to the Apache chieftain that he might be allowed to witness the contest, and Serape Colorado, jumping at

once to the conclusion that the white man, being a wizard, wished to be present so that by his arts he might be able to assist his countryman, granted the request.

The old chief hated both of the young warriors because he knew they aspired to depose him from the chieftainship, and he was disposed to do all he could to favor the white man.

Then, too, he had a curiosity to see how the white conjurer would act if he invoked the powers of darkness to aid the pale-face warrior.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A DESPERATE ENCOUNTER.

THERE was a wonderful difference in the appearance of the two men as they faced each other.

The Gray Buffalo, like all the "horse Indians," as the tribes are called who depend upon their ponies to carry them from place to place—was misshapen, having a big, brawny body set upon short and crooked legs. This arises from the fact that the horse Indians from the time they are big enough to straddle the back of a steed spend about as much time on horseback as on foot, and so their lower limbs become almost deformed.

Talbot, on the contrary, was splendidly developed, and no one portion at the expense of another.

He had merely removed his outer garment, and like all perfectly-proportioned men, did not appear to be nearly as big as he really was.

Not until he was stripped, after the fashion of the prize-ring, was his real size apparent.

Talbot's bowie knife had a ten-inch blade and was a far better weapon in every respect than the cheap and common tool of his opponent.

But, strange as it may appear, the sharp-eyed Apache princess was the only one who noticed this fact.

The others were so engaged in watching the movements of the pair that they never noticed the difference in the weapons.

The two slowly approached each other, the warrior advancing in a way that strongly resembled the stealthy approach of the tiger.

When a couple of yards only intervened between the two the Indian made a sudden dash at his opponent and struck furiously at him.

But Talbot had anticipated the attack and evaded it by jumping nimbly to one side so that the knife-thrust only passed through his shirt instead of entering his breast, as the Apache chief had intended.

Then, wheeling quickly, Talbot plunged his knife into the brawny side of the brave, inflicting a terrible wound.

For a moment the savage reeled under the force of the stroke, and then, collecting all his energies, the chief made another desperate rush at his adversary.

Believing that he was mortally wounded, he threw all caution to the wind; all he cared for now was to revenge the wound which he had received, regardless of any danger.

But Talbot, quicker in every way than his opponent, easily avoided the attack, and the Apache brave, his strength failing him, fell forward, first on his knees and then rolled over on his side.

The fight was ended.

The Apaches gazed in amazement; they could hardly believe it was possible that the white man had gained so easy a victory.

But perceiving that the warrior did not rise to renew the contest they understood that the contest was indeed ended, and the braves who had been selected to look after the duelists hastened to the assistance of the fallen man.

They picked him up and bore him away to his wigwam, where the medicine-men of the tribe proceeded to dress his wound.

The moment that the beaten warrior was borne away the Painted Oak rose amid the warriors and stepped forward.

He was not deterred by the fate which had befallen his brother brave, but burned to avenge his defeat, although he bore him no good will.

"What weapon will the Apache brave choose?" Serape Colorado asked.

In answer the warrior drew forth his revolver and held it up.

The Apache chieftain nodded his approval.

"Give the white brave one of his weapons," he commanded.

One of the revolvers which had been taken from the sport at the time of his capture was returned to him.

It was fully charged, not having been tampered with.

Then, in obedience to the orders of the great chief, the circle of auditors opened, the spectators ranged themselves in two parallel lines, and the duelists were placed at the extreme ends of the line about a hundred feet apart.

"When I lift my hand, begin!" exclaimed Serape Colorado.

There was a minute of almost breathless impatience, and then up came the big and brawny red paw of the chief.

A second later Talbot fired, much to the astonishment of everybody, the Painted Oak in particular, who had just commenced to take careful aim.

Dick Talbot had made one of the wonderful snap-shots which in the old time in California had made him so famous, giving him the reputation of being the champion shot of the Pacific Slope.

The sport still possessed his rare skill as a marksman, for the bullet went straight to the mark at which it had been aimed—the right shoulder of the Painted Oak, and the pistol dropped from his hand before he had a chance to fire a shot.

Again the spectators stared in wonder.

The warrior stooped, attempted to pick up the revolver, and then fell forward on his face.

The wound was an ugly one and the Apache brave, weakened by it, had fainted.

"Wah! the white chief is a great warrior!" Serape Colorado exclaimed, decidedly astonished at the speedy manner in which the pale-face had disposed of the two men who bore the reputation of being the best warriors in the tribe.

Then the discomfited warrior was removed from the field, and the Apache chieftain announced that there was now a chance for any brave who desired to encounter the white man.

The warriors looked at each other, but, to use the old Irish joke, they were all extremely backward in coming forward.

To one who was well acquainted with the red-skins there was nothing strange in this.

The pale-face had given proof that he was a great warrior by overcoming with little effort two of the best men that the Apache nation could boast, and if he was good enough to do this, what chance was there for any lesser warrior to score a triumph.

And in such a case as this, according to the notion of the Indians, it was no imputation upon a man's courage to decline to enter a contest where the chances would be against him.

The red-skins are as brave as any race of men that have ever trod the earth, but when the tide of battle is not running in their favor they do not consider it a disgrace to take to their heels and retreat as fast as possible.

So in the present instance; now that the Apache warriors had seen what the white chief could do in the fighting line, there was not one of them that cared to risk his life by meeting him in single fight.

For fully five minutes there was silence; Serape Colorado looked in an inquiring way around upon his warriors, just as if he expected to see a dozen or so of them start up, eager for the chance to meet in hostile array the victorious white man.

But in reality the wily old savage did not anticipate anything of the kind.

He judged the rest by himself; in his opinion there was no warrior in the tribe who was any better than himself, and he had good reason for the belief, for it was certain that no man in his time had performed greater feats of arms, and he knew full well that after witnessing such an exhibition of prowess as the white chief had given, he would not have cared to face the pale-face, man to man.

Years ago, when Serape Colorado had first begun to make a mark as a warrior, he was with a war party that encountered a number of trappers, among whom was the scout, Kit Carson, then barely more than a boy, and a duel between him and the boy scout had been arranged.

In the fight, Serape Colorado had been most ingloriously defeated, and he still bore the scar of the terrible wound which he had received in the contest, and ever since that time the Apache chief had never been anxious to meet any of the pale-faces, who seemed like a warrior, in a hand-to-hand encounter.

As the old chief would have said, when it came to a duel, the white-skin had "big medicine."

Chico Colorado, too, swept her dark eyes around; and she, like her father, was of the opinion that none of the Apache braves would dare to encounter the white chief.

"The pale-face has proved the victor," Chico Colorado remarked. "Is there none of the Apache warriors who desire to avenge the fate of their brothers?"

Again there was silence; again the braves looked at each other, just as if each man expected that his neighbor would be prompt to rise.

Not a man stirred, though, but after the lapse of a minute or so, one of the old wise men of the tribe arose.

Big Lone Pine he was called, and he bore the reputation of being one of the greatest sages of the tribe.

"Oh, Serape Colorado, great chieftain of the Apache nation!" he exclaimed. "It is not wise for the young men of our tribe to meet this pale-face stranger in single fight. His medicine is too big; he is protected by the dark spirit who dwells among the storm-clouds, and no matter how brave a mortal may be, he cannot contend with these mighty beings who ride upon the wings of the wind."

A deep grunt of assent escaped from the lips of almost every listener as the old chief resumed his seat.

The declaration flattered the vanity of the savages; their pride had been sorely wounded by the ease with which the pale-face had triumphed over the two warriors, but if the unseen spirits of the air had had a hand in the matter, it was quite another affair.

"The Big Lone Pine speaks with the voice of wisdom!" Serape Colorado declared, "and my braves are wise not to dare the white man's medicine."

At this point the Apache chieftain was interrupted by the blare of a trumpet.

CHAPTER XXV.

UNEXPECTED VISITORS.

THE sound of the trumpet acted like an electric shock upon the savages.

They sprung to their feet and glared in amazement down the valley from whence the sound had come.

The astonishment of the Apaches can easily be imagined when they saw a large force of United States soldiers advancing at a brisk trot.

The troops were already within rifle-range, having come into the valley through a narrow trail which led over the foot-hills, instead of advancing up the stream.

A more complete surprise could not have been imagined.

The blare of the trumpet had been the signal for the soldiers to form in line ready for an attack.

The valley was wide enough to allow them to perform this movement to perfection, and as they came into line, to the disgust of the Indians, they saw that the soldiers were provided with a light mountain-gun, mounted upon the back of a mule, a kind of artillery which is commonly termed a "jackass battery," and if there was anything in the world which the red-skins hated and feared it was the "big gun" of the blue-coated warriors.

After forming into line of battle, again the trumpet sounded, and this time it was the signal for a halt; the advancing line of blue came to a standstill, the mule bearing the gun wheeling around so as to bring the piece to bear upon the Indian village.

The gun was in the center of the line, so as to command the position, and at the extreme right rode the officer who led the troops; by his side was a figure clad in the prairie garb of buckskin, and when the red-skins got a good look at this person they made the discovery that it was the youth who had made his escape from them in so wonderful a manner.

And if they had had any doubts in regard to this subject it would have been dispelled by the fact that by the side of the horse which the supposed youth rode, trotted the brindle bulldog, Jerusalem.

This discovery was anything but an agreeable one to the red-skins, for during their search for the escaped pale-face, they had come across the body of the Indian warrior who had been killed by the dog, and finding that the dead man had been despoiled of his arms and provisions, they immediately jumped to the conclusion that his death was due to the youth of whom they were in search, and they had promised themselves the pleasure of putting the pale-face to the torture when they laid hold of him, for the Apaches felt sure that they would be able to recapture the fugitive.

Therefore it was as gall and wormwood to them to make the discovery that their late captive was with the troops, for the moment they discovered his presence they immediately jumped to the conclusion that he had acted as guide to the soldiers, and that if it had not been for him the troops would never have been able to surprise them in this masterly fashion.

With the gray-haired, gray-bearded officer in command of the party the red skins were well acquainted too, and there was no officer in the service whom they feared more.

Major John Benteen, as the officer was named, was one of the most expert Indian-fighters who had ever held a command on the border.

A dozen times at least had he succeeded in "striking" the red-skins when they were on the war-trail, and each and every time had won a complete victory.

Long experience had taught him just how to fight the wily red braves, and, as in this instance, he always maneuvered to take them by surprise.

The men under his command too had become expert Indian-fighters, contrary to the usual rule in regard to United States troops, for as a general thing one red-skin brave is equal to three or four soldiers in the peculiar style of warfare common to the wild West, but the boys of Benteen's command never hesitated to attack an Indian force, outnumbering them three or four to one, and as they had never been defeated they always went into action feeling sure of victory.

Therefore the moment that Serape Colorado and his Apaches recognized the new-comers, they understood that it was no common foe which had so boldly advanced into the valley, and that though they outnumbered the white-skins about four to one, yet if a fight took place

the chances were big that the intruders would whip them.

Then too, all their women and children were present, and in the event of a contest, would be sure to suffer, and it is one of the cardinal principles of the Indians never to fight, if a contest can possibly be avoided, until their women and children are removed to a place of safety.

So, in the present instance, although the Apaches had grasped their weapons the moment they discovered the troops were in the valley, yet when they saw that the soldiers came to a halt and manifested no intention of advancing to an attack, although drawn up in warlike array, all ready for an advance, they felt relieved; the red-skins were extremely desirous of avoiding a battle if such a thing were possible.

Another strong point with the Indians is to never go into a fight without all the advantage is on their side, if it can possibly be arranged in that way.

"Wah! it is the big white chief Benteen!" Serape Colorado exclaimed in a tone which plainly revealed how extremely unwelcome the discovery was to him.

Dark was the scowl upon the face of the old chief as he glanced first at the troops and then at the prisoners.

Upon the face of the old mountain-man was a broad grin, and there was a quiet smile too, on Talbot's expressive features.

Both understood that the advent of the troops meant liberty to them, and they naturally were as delighted as the Apaches were disgusted.

"The soldiers will take us captives!" exclaimed the Apache princess in the ear of her father.

The old chief ran his eyes rapidly over the blue-coated lines and then glanced at his warriors, who, with their weapons clutched in their hands, were scowling at the intruders.

Chico Colorado understood the thoughts which were passing through the mind of her sire.

"We have warriors enough to sweep them from the earth!" the girl exclaimed, impetuously.

Serape Colorado reflected for a moment and then shook his head.

"No, no; the risk is too great," he replied.

"We are four to one!" the girl urged, forgetting all her caution in her desire to keep the prisoners.

"Yes; but the white-skins have us in a trap."

"Can we not break out?" the Indian princess exclaimed. "One bold dash and we would overwhelm them!"

Again the old chief shook his head.

He was as anxious as the girl to retain the prisoners, but his judgment was not clouded by rage as was the case with her.

By the skillful execution of the movement which the troops had made they had secured such decided advantage that the wily Apache chieftain felt certain if a fight took place that his tribe would be about exterminated.

"I am as reluctant as you to yield these white men," Serape Colorado remarked. "And if we stood any chance to beat these white dogs I would fight until the last gasp, but, as I said, we are in a trap; that big gun is equal to a hundred warriors. Benteen is a great chief, and his braves are big fighting-men. If we give battle and are beaten it will be the ruin of our tribe."

"I would rather die than to yield the pale-faces!" Chico Colorado cried, now more like a wild-cat than ever.

The old chief shook his head.

"No, no, we must not think of it; but we will try to retain the white-skins without a fight," the Apache chieftain remarked, with a crafty smile.

Serape Colorado was no scholar and could not boast of any book-learning, therefore he had no knowledge of the wise injunction of the Greek sage, "when the lion's skin falls short eke it out with the fox's," but that was the game he was going to play.

He glanced upon the Apaches, noted their scowling faces and the way in which the braves clutched their weapons, and understood that they were prepared to fight to the death, although few of them had any idea that they could succeed in defeating the intruding pale-faces.

"Be patient, warriors of the Apache nation!" Serape Colorado exclaimed, in his deep sonorous voice, pitching his tone so that his words would be audible to the distant foe. "Our white brothers do not come to make war upon us. There is peace between the red-men and the white-skins; so let no man lift his finger in wrath."

The red-skins were quick enough to understand the game that the old chief had determined to play, and so they smoothed their wrinkled brows.

Then Serape Colorado marched boldly forth to meet the white men.

A few words were exchanged between Major Benteen and his guide, Alva, as we shall continue to call the disguised girl.

"The old red buck is not anxious for war," the officer observed, with a grim smile.

"Thanks to the way in which you showed me how to work this trick, we have got the dead-

wood on him in the wu'st kind of way; the wily old heathen has sense enough to know that if he made a fight it would be pretty certain to result in the wiping-out of his tribe, and, like all red-skins under similar circumstances, he is now an extremely good Indian; his voice is for peace, but if he thought that he had a good chance to beat us, how quickly he would raise the war-shout!"

The major had no idea that his guide was anything but what he pretended to be, for he had known both the father and the supposed son for some time, and there was no suspicion in the soldier's mind that the youth who had managed in such a dexterous manner to escape from the hands of the Apaches, was a woman.

"He is a miserable old wretch and his daughter is worse than he," Alva replied.

"Yes, she is a regular tiger-cat, I should judge, from what I have heard of her, I would like to get a chance to cut her claws, but as she is a woman, I don't suppose I ever shall."

Then the two rode forward to meet the chief.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE CONFERENCE.

THERE was an air of lofty dignity in the bearing of the Apache chieftain as he advanced to meet his unwelcome visitors, and Major Benteen called his companion's attention to it.

"Just look at the airs that the murdering old blackguard puts on!" the soldier exclaimed in the ear of Alva as they rode onward.

"Doesn't he look as if he thought he owned the whole world? Do you suppose that Nero, or any one of the old Roman tyrants, could have marched forward with a prouder air?"

"He is an arrogant beast!" Alva replied.

"And if he dared he would fly at our throats in a moment."

"Oh, yes, no doubt about that. He is a blood-thirsty old ruffian, and would be glad to get a chance to wipe us out, but at the present time he cannot spell the word able," and there was a deal of satisfaction in the soldier's voice as he made the announcement.

"He is no fool, this same Serape Colorado, and has wit enough to know when he is in a tight place and when he isn't. He has four or five men to our one, but is incumbered by the presence of his squaws and children, and then, too, he has a wholesome fear of our jackass battery, for he has faced the gun before, and knows what it can do."

"In a fight with the reds that one little piece is worth a couple of hundred men."

The near approach of the chief put an end to the conversation at this point.

The three met and halted.

"What brings the great white chief to the village of Serape Colorado in the Apache-Land?" the red king demanded, in an extremely arrogant way.

But Major Benteen was not the man to stand any nonsense from a "red devil," as in his moments of confidence he was used to characterizing the feather-garnished chieftains.

So in a tone equally as stern and arrogant as that which the Apache brave had used, he demanded:

"What does Serape Colorado mean by seizing the persons of three white men, proceeding peacefully about their business, making them prisoners and threatening them with death?"

The brow of the Apache grew dark, and angry fires shot from his fierce eyes at being thus rudely called to an account.

"What were the white men doing in the land of the Indian?" the chief cried. "This is the Apache-Land," and he made a broad sweep with his hand as he spoke. "The white-skins have no business here. They must not come and dig in the earth and frighten away the game upon which the red-men depend to feed themselves, their squaws and their little ones."

"Granted that the white men had no business in the Apache-Land, it does not follow because they are foolish enough to trespass that they are to be put to death."

"That is as the red-man shall decide!" the chief retorted, in his haughtiest manner.

"Oh, no, no, not at all!" the major cried, bluntly. "That would be a deuce of an idea to give you reds the right to put any white man to death because he happened to stray into the territory which you claim! How would it be if we claimed the right to kill any Apache whom we found outside of the Apache-Land?"

"All the land once belonged to the red-man, and he has a right to go where he lists!" the Apache chieftain retorted.

"Not by a jugful! unless you concede the same right to the white men!" the soldier declared. "The proper course for you to have pursued in this instance was to warn these intruders that they must depart, and then, if they refused, and defied your power, you would have been justified in using force; but as the matter has been reported to me I understand that you jumped on them with an overwhelming force, and after making them prisoners declared that you intended to put them to death, and yet at the present time there is no war existing between your tribe and the whites."

"If there is peace, why are you and your

blue-coated chiefs here with your big gun?" the Apache leader demanded.

"That question is easily answered. I am in pursuit of some red bucks from the Salt River Reservation who have been stealing stock and committing other outrages along the Gila," the major replied.

"When they found that I was hot on their trail they fled up into this region, and contrived to give me the slip; just by accident I encountered this young man, and when he told me of the deviltry that you had been up to, I saw that it was about time I interfered."

"It is no business of yours!" Serape Colorado cried, arrogantly.

"Oh, isn't it?" the soldier exclaimed. "Well, now, you never made a greater mistake in your life, and you will find it out, too, before you are ten minutes older."

"Do you see that gun there?" and the major pointed to the jackass battery.

Serape Colorado took a good look at the piece of artillery, just as if he had never seen it before. Then he turned to the soldier and said:

"The Apache chief sees the big gun—what of it?"

"I am going to give you about ten minutes to turn those two white men over to me, and if you refuse to comply, with that gun I shall open fire on your village," the major remarked, sternly.

The massive breast of the Apache chieftain swelled with rage, and dark was the frown which came over his features.

"The white chief will not dare!" he cried.

"Oh, will I not?" the soldier retorted.

"Well, I can just tell you that if you think that way you never made a greater mistake in your life, for I mean business every time."

"But there is peace between the Apaches and the white men," Serape Colorado urged, beginning to moderate his tone a little, finding that the major was not disposed to be bullied.

"Exactly, and that is the reason why I demand you shall release these white men," the soldier retorted. "You made a mistake in seizing them, and the quicker you give them up the better."

The Apache chieftain reflected for a moment; although he knew that the whites had managed to secure an advantage, yet, with all the bulldog-like instincts of the savage, he had been in hopes that he could in some way manage to retain the prisoners; but the tone of the officer showed him plainly that the major was thoroughly in earnest, and was not disposed to stand any nonsense.

So, like Captain Scott's 'coon, Serape Colorado proposed to come down.

"I must consult my warriors," he said. "The fate of the prisoners does not rest in my hands alone."

"Very well; but I say, Serape, I am not in the humor to stand any funny business, you know," the major said in a tone of warning.

"There are the two white men; I can see them plainly, and I do not intend to lose sight of them, and at the first attempt of your warriors to either remove them, or to try any gum-game I will open fire on you and clean out your whole outfit!"

The Apache chieftain did not at all relish this plain speaking, and so, with a great deal of pride, he replied:

"Serape Colorado and his Apache braves are not dogs to crouch at the white man's frown! We are warriors and have proved that we fear not death on many a field. But the red-men have smoked the pipe of peace with their white brothers, and they do not desire to dig up the war-hatchet. The white-men deserve to die for daring to seek for gold in the Apache-Land, but as my brother the great white chief, is anxious that their lives shall be spared, Serape Colorado will speak to his braves, and no doubt they will grant the request."

"If they don't I will make them hunt their holes quicker than they ever did before in their lives!" was Major Benteen's blunt reply.

"When the time comes for the Apache warrior to sing his death-song he will sing it with a stout heart, for the passage to the happy hunting-grounds has no terrors to his soul," Serape Colorado replied, and then he turned and stalked with majestic stride back to his people, who were anxiously waiting the result of the conference.

The Apaches had not dared to make a movement looking to either defense or flight, for they saw that the cannonier was by the side of the big gun, ready to discharge the piece, and they feared that any motion on their part would bring the death-dealing shell screeching among them.

The Apache princess, though, had advanced to Talbot's side.

Her brow was dark with rage, and if she could have had her way she would have brought on a conflict immediately, for she was so wild and fierce by nature that she would rather have died with the white man, who had won her fancy, than live without him.

But as all thoughts of resistance were vain, she, like her father, determined to try what words would do.

Since the warrior's arms were useless, woman's witchery must come in play.

"Your white brothers are yonder," she said, as she came up to Talbot.

"Yes, I see them."

"They come to take you away."

"Yes."

"And do you wish to go?"

The voice of the Apache princess softened, and her dark eyes grew liquid as she put the question.

"Oh, yes; is it not natural? If you were taken prisoner by the whites and your people came for you, would you not want to go with them?"

"The case is different; I am the queen of the tribe!" the girl replied, proudly.

"And you don't think that I am a king among my people, then?" Talbot asked, with a smile.

"You are a great warrior, but not a king. Stay here and you will be one!" the girl urged, persuasively.

"It is impossible."

"You reject, then, the love that I offer?" the Apache princess asked, her voice deep and full of sadness.

"I have a wife among my own people whom I love, and I cannot desert her."

"I know; she rides yonder by the side of the great blue-coated chief!" the girl exclaimed, her manner suddenly changing, and the likeness to the tiger-cat again appearing.

"I detected her disguise, and knowing that she was your squaw, I would have killed her, but the Great Spirit ruled otherwise. It was a fatal error, for through my attempt she was able to escape and bring these white chiefs to your rescue."

Talbot shook his head.

"You are wrong; if this youth is a woman I have no knowledge of the fact, and my squaw is far away in the South. It was just by accident that I happened to be with the two."

Chico shook her head; she did not credit the statement, and at this moment the conversation was interrupted by the approach of the old chief.

Brief was the consultation which the Apaches held.

They were under the harrow, knew it, and so agreed to yield the prisoners.

CHAPTER XXVII.

AT LIBERTY.

SERAPE COLORADO gave orders to restore to the prisoners the arms and other articles which had been taken from them, and then he conducted them to where the soldiers sat upon their horses watching the scene.

But before Talbot departed Chico Colorado got an opportunity to say another word to him.

"If this white man-squaw was dead, then, maybe, you would be willing to stay in the Apache-Land," she said, in Talbot's ear.

"Oh, no, not at all; you are laboring under a mistake in regard to that matter. She is nothing to me, nor I to her," the sport replied. "My squaw, as I told you, is far away in the South."

The Indian princess shook her head, and it was plain from the expression upon her features that she did not believe the statement.

Having been reared in an atmosphere of lies—for the Apaches are notoriously the most untruthful of all the Western Indians—she had no faith that any white man would not lie if he could profit by so doing.

She was convinced that the disguised girl was the barrier which existed between herself and the white chief whose love she sought, and she was firm in the belief that if the girl did not stand in the way she might succeed in winning him.

"Wa-al, Major Benteen, I am mighty glad to see you, I kin tell you!" the old mountain-man exclaimed, as he came up to the line of blue.

The major shook hands with Kruger, and then the scout introduced Talbot.

"This hyer is a new pard of mine—a clean white man, an' no mistake—all wool, a yard wide, an' warranted A No. 1!"

Talbot and the major shook hands.

"I was in a pesky hole, major, you kin bet yer boots!" the old mountain-man continued. "This hyer big red chief had us foul, an' I reckon he would have let daylight through us 'fore long, though my pard hyer kinder bought his life by laying out two of the red bucks in the fairest an' squarest kind of a fight."

"Is that possible?" the soldier asked, surveying Dick Talbot with decided interest.

"You kin bet all you air worth onto it!" Kruger declared.

And then he related the particulars of the duels.

"The Painted Oak and the Gray Buffalo, eh?" Major Benteen exclaimed, decidedly astonished by the recital. "I knew both of them; good men, too; as good warriors, Serape, as you have in the tribe."

"Yes, good warriors; plenty others as good, though," the Apache chieftain remarked. "The white brave is not wise or he would stay with

the Apaches, for they would make a great chief out of him."

"Yes; but I reckon he prefers a different kind of life," the major remarked, dryly. "But I say, Serape, can't you provide a couple of ponies, to mount these gentlemen? I only had one spare horse in the outfit and that this pard of yours took."

And he nodded to Alva.

"Yes, that would be 'bout the squar' thing," the old mountain-man remarked.

The Apache chieftain nodded assent, and calling to one of his braves ordered a couple of ponies to be brought.

"You pay for these, hey, major?" asked the Indian chief, who had always been noted for having a keen eye to the main chance.

"Oh, no!" Talbot exclaimed, "we will settle the bill."

"How?" cried the savage chieftain in astonishment.

"I said that we will pay for the ponies; but I mean that I will," Talbot explained.

"You cannot pay—you have no money!" Serape Colorado exclaimed, disdainfully.

The Indians had "gone through" the white men immediately after their capture and had been disgusted with the small amount of money that they obtained.

"Oh, don't you fret about that!" the old mountain-man exclaimed. "We air not tenderfeet, but have been rustling 'round these hyar Western wildernesses for a big number of years, an' when we reckoned that thar wasn't no sight for us to git out of yer clutches we jist went in to save all we could, an' so we hid our wealth. Put yer price onto these hyer two pieces of crow-bait and I reckon we kin raise the ante, every time!"

The chief, by his face, plainly showed the disgust which he felt at being thus outwitted.

"Ugh!" he exclaimed, "the white men made a fool of the Apache chief. Mebbe next time the Indians will make fools of them."

"That is all right, Serape; turn about is fair play," Benteen observed, enjoying the sharp practice which had outwitted the thieving redskins.

"How much for the hosses—that is the p'int afore the meetin'!" the old mountain-man exclaimed.

"Twenty dollars," said the Apache chieftain, after apparently studying over the matter for a moment.

"Wa-al, that is 'bout right—for the two," Kruger remarked.

"No, not for two—apiece!" exclaimed Serape Colorado.

"Oh, come down!" cried the old mountain-man, "don't go to stickin' it onto fellers you know! Sich brutes as them air ar' only worth ten dollars, an' nary a cent more."

"No, no, twenty dollars, fine ponies!" exclaimed the chief.

"I will tell you what I'll do," Talbot remarked at this point. "I will put up forty dollars against the ponies and cut cards with you to see who takes both ponies and money."

As the old Indian chief was an inveterate gambler this proposition just suited him.

"It is good!" he declared with a deep grunt of satisfaction. "The red-man will skin his white brother."

"Or git skinned yourself, maybe, for thar's no tellin' how many fleas thar is on a dog until the animal is dead an' you ketch an' count 'em," the old mountain-man observed, sagely.

Serape Colorado produced a pack of cards from his pouch, decidedly the worse for wear, and after shuffling them in a dexterous manner handed them to the sport.

Talbot shuffled them for a moment, the old chief watching him with the eyes of an eagle, as though he feared that the white man intended to perform some trick, but Talbot was too old a hand not to be able to do what he wanted with the cards without danger of being detected, except by a man equally as skillful as himself, which the brawny Indian was not.

The shuffling over, Talbot presented the cards to the Apache.

"Do you want to shuffle them again?" he asked.

The chief shook his head; being satisfied that the white man had not come any sly trick, he was content.

"Will you cut first or will I?" the sport asked.

The Indian reflected for a moment and then said he would begin.

"Go ahead, then!"

Serape Colorado cut with a bold hand and displayed the ten of spades.

"Clubs would have suited you better," the old mountain-man commented.

The Apache chieftain shook his head. He was not satisfied with the card that fortune had given him.

"Don't like it, eh?" exclaimed the sport, perceiving the look of dissatisfaction on the face of the Indian.

"No good," observed the chief.

"Durn me for a mule red-skin, if I don't reckon that you want the airth!" the old mountain-man exclaimed.

"You ought to be satisfied with a ten-spot,"

Talbot remarked, as he took the cards in his hand. "In my time I have seen a ten-spot win a heap of money; you must remember that there are eight cards lower than the ten, and only four better, counting the ace as high, and not as low."

Then the Indian came the old trick common to the gamster who wants to have all the advantage he can possibly gain.

"Ace is low—not high!" he exclaimed.

"Oh, come, that was not agreed upon before we commenced!" Talbot protested. "And in the absence of a special agreement the ace is always counted high."

"No, no, low!" cried Serape Colorado, doggedly.

"What do you say, major?" the sport asked.

"I have always seen the ace counted as the best card in the pack in cutting," the soldier replied.

"No, low!" the savage persisted.

"All right, have it low, then; anything to be agreeable," Talbot remarked.

But the sport had merely prolonged the conversation to enable him to make a "pass" which he performed in so dexterous a manner that no one perceived that the cards had moved at all, although by the operation he had shifted the top half of the pack to the bottom, thus getting the aces in one place and all the face cards in another; he had previously brought all the aces and face cards together during his shuffle. And now that this maneuver was performed, it was an easy thing for him to turn up a face card, which happened to be the jack of hearts.

"The hosses are ourn!" the old scout cried, in delight.

"I'll cut you now for a stake if you want revenge!" Talbot remarked, shuffling the cards so as to mix them up again.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A TRAGEDY.

THE Apache chieftain reflected over the matter for a moment, and it was evident from the expressions upon his features that the temptation was a strong one, and if Dick Talbot had been any ordinary man there is no doubt the chief would have accepted the banter for, as the old scout would have said, "He was a gambler from Gamblerville."

But the ease with which the white chief had conquered the two Indians had impressed him with the belief that his captive was an extra good man—such a one as was not to be encountered every day in the week, and his success with the cards made the Apache leader come to the belief that his "medicine" was so good that it would be useless for any one to attempt to compete with him.

The thoughts flashed rapidly through the mind of the old Indian as he reflected upon the matter, and he shook his head at last.

"You don't feel like trying the rifle, eh?" Talbot observed, snapping the edges of the cards together in that seductive way so attractive to a gamster's ears.

There was a wishful look upon the face of the Apache chieftain; for a moment he hesitated, then he heaved a heavy sigh, and again shook his head, this time in an extremely decided manner.

"No, no; the chief is no fool; he knows when he has got enough," he remarked.

"Wa-al, durn me ef I thought yer head was screwed on as straight as that!" the old mountain-man exclaimed.

"It r'ally seems as if you ain't half so big a hog as you look," he continued with a prodigious grin.

Serape Colorado did not like this remark, and he scowled at the old scout in an ugly way, but this only made Kruger grin the more.

"Oh, you kin scowl all you like now, chief!" he exclaimed. "You ain't got me cooped up in yer durned village like a chicken in a cage, an' if this hyer court knows herself, an' she thinks she do, it will be a mighty long time afore you git another chance at me!"

"Mebbe Apache catch you ag'in—keep you tight!" the old chieftain remarked in an extremely significant way.

"Yes, I reckon, mebbe, that you will, when you git me," the old mountain-man retorted.

Then the pair mounted.

"So-long, chief, I may have the pleasure of seeing you again some time," Talbot remarked. "And I shall always hold myself in readiness to give you your revenge at cards whenever you feel inclined for a little game."

"Some time, mebbe," Serape Colorado replied. But there was an expression on his face which seemed to imply that he was not hankering after any more tests of Dick Talbot's ability in the card line.

"Take care of yourself, chief, and bear in mind my warning about white men," Major Benteen remarked as he grasped his bridle-reins. "If you don't, you will get into trouble one of these days."

Serape Colorado merely grunted in reply, and from the look upon his face it was evident that he attached but little importance to the warning.

Away went the soldiers at a slow trot down the valley with the three adventurers, who had

been rescued in such a miraculous manner from the power of the red-skins, for, as the old mountain-man observed, it was about as narrow an escape as was recorded in all the annals of the wild West.

"That was a smart trick of yours to hide your plunder," the major observed, as they rode down the valley.

"Yes, you bet!" the old scout observed, with a chuckle. "We didn't have a great deal of wealth, but we made up our minds that the red niggers shouldn't get it."

"I can appreciate the feeling," the soldier remarked. "I would rather have thrown the money away, even if I knew that I would never see it again, than allow these red thieves to get it."

"That was our idee to a hair, only we had time to work an' so buried the plunder, calculating that if we managed to slip out of the hands of the red devils we could git it some time," Kruger explained.

"Well, you might as well go for it now," the major observed. "I don't suppose it will take us much out of our way."

"Whar are ye bound?"

"Fort McDowell."

"That is all right then; we kin strike the spot without going half a mile out of the way."

"Is there any danger that these Apaches will attempt to get around in front of us and try an ambuscade?" Talbot asked.

"Not much," the soldier replied. "We will keep our eyes open of course, but I have struck Serape Colorado and his band twice already, and after their experience with me I don't believe that either the old chief or any of his warriors are anxious to get another taste of my quality."

"The red niggers seldom hanker for a fight, anyway, unless they kin have everything their own way," the old mountain-man observed. "I know 'em like a book! If the big 'Pache chief thought he could jump on us at some p'int whar we didn't stand no show, he would do it in a minute, but if he reckoned we would be able to make a good fight, he wouldn't want none of it in his'n."

Benteen agreed to this, and so the command rode on, all ready for a fight, although none was expected.

The old mountain-man guided the detachment to the point where the adventurers had thought to make a stand when they discovered that the Apaches were on their track.

The money which they had hidden was recovered, and then again the line of march for Fort McDowell was taken up.

The three adventurers, while securing their buried treasures, got an opportunity to exchange a few words.

"I suppose this will put a stop to our expedition for the present?" Talbot remarked.

"Oh, yes; we don't stand no chance now to make the rifle," the old scout replied. "The red niggers are all up in arms, jest for all the world like a lot of bees when an enemy comes near the hive. As I said right at the beginning our only chance was to sneak in, gobble the gold, an' dust out as fast as our legs would let us, but this 'ar rumpus has knocked that leetle plan all in the head."

"Yes, undoubtedly," Talbot observed. "The Apaches will be sure to shadow us until we are well out of their country."

"You can bet all you air worth on that, an' you would call the turn every time!" Kruger declared. "You kin jest go yer bottom dollar that they will keep their eyes on us until we are out of the 'Pache-Land."

"Do you suppose there would be any chance for us if we went with the soldiers until we get into the lower country, out of the Indian territory, and then left them and made an attempt to get at our treasure again?"

"Pard, I don't r'ally reckon that thar will be any use of our tryin' a scheme of that kind for some time," the old mountain man replied, after cogitating about the matter for a moment.

"You see, the red niggers have got onto us. Of course, we didn't let on that we were arter gold, but these 'Paches air no fools, an' they know darned well that we were in for a leetle game of that kind. They know how we were heading, an' you kin bet yer boots they will be 'spicious that we will try to make the rifle ag'in, an' it stands to reason they will keep a mighty close watch over this deestric."

"Yes, that is true. I reckon that we will have to wait for a month or two, so as to give them time to get over this alarm," Talbot remarked.

"That is about the size of it. We have got to wait, and thar's no two ways 'bout it!" the old mountain-man exclaimed, decidedly.

"It was a durned unlucky thing for us that Serape Colorado happened to have his village in this region," he continued. "If he and his red niggers had been on the other side of the Mogolon Mountains, as I expected they was when I started in for this hyer thing, we could have made the rifle as easy as rollin' off a log; luck was ag'in us, pard, an' that's all thar is to it."

Having secured their "plunder," the two

rejoined the troops and again the command proceeded on its way.

The trail was a narrow one, leading through a broken and irregular country, and the horsemen rode by twos.

In the advance came Major Benteen and Dick Talbot, then the old mountain-man and Alva, and then the soldiers.

For a couple of hours the march proceeded without interruption, but, as the expedition was proceeding through a particularly rough bit of country—just the spot for an ambushade, as Dick Talbot had suggested to the major—a rifle-shot rung out sharp and clear on the still mountain air.

A cry of alarm escaped from the lips of both the old mountain-man and his supposed son.

The soldiers grasped their arms and the command halted, expecting an immediate attack, but no second shot succeeded the first.

Far up on the mountain-side a little white smoke, curling upon the still air, betrayed from whence the shot had come.

With wonderful quickness Dick Talbot's rifle sprung to his shoulder, and he fired three shots into the clump of pines above which the smoke hung.

The shots were fired at random, of course, but they came so near the lurking-place of the concealed foe, who fired upon the expedition, that he was forced to abandon his position, and retreat up the mountain-side.

As he skulked amid the rocks and bushes he was distinctly seen.

It was a young Indian brave in full war-paint—a slender fellow, barely more than a boy, but as fleet and light of foot almost as a deer.

He gained the summit of the mountain, and there, only half-hid by the bushes which fringed the top of the ridge, he was seen to leap to the back of an Indian pony and dash madly away.

Two more shots Dick Talbot fired, but the distance was too great, and the bullets whistled harmlessly through the air without touching the fugitive.

"Merciful heavens! I am hard hit, you bet!" cried the old mountain-man.

CHAPTER XXIX.

ALVA'S RESOLVE.

The old man reeled in the saddle and would have fallen had not Alva supported him.

Blood was also flowing from the disguised girl, and staining the front of the buckskin hunting-shirt.

The shot had evidently been aimed at him, but owing to the distance the bullet had not gone true to its aim, passing across the breast instead of entering the body, inflicting a slight flesh-wound in the shoulder, and then had gone deep into the side of the old scout.

"Oh, father, speak to me—are you badly hurt?" Alva cried.

But the old mountain-man answered not; his eyes were closed—he leaned, a dead weight, against Alva, and but for the support would have fallen to the ground.

"He has fainted," Major Benteen exclaimed.

As it happened, the regimental surgeon was in command, and he immediately came to the assistance of the stricken man.

By this time the young Indian was out of sight, and it was apparent that the troops had not fallen into an ambushade, and that the warrior was alone.

"A young devil!" Major Benteen observed. "Probably on his first war-path, and he could not resist the opportunity to take a crack at us. I shall know the fellow if I ever see him again, I think, and you can rest assured I will make it warm for him if I ever get within reaching distance of his copper-colored carcass!"

The old scout was removed from his horse and placed upon the ground.

A brief examination, and then the surgeon shook his head.

"What is the matter, doctor? Can't you do anything for him?" Major Benteen asked.

"All the doctors in the world will not do this man any good," responded the surgeon, who was a rough, blunt old fellow, but a most excellent doctor.

"Is he done for?" the major asked, his harsh, commanding tone insensibly softening in the presence of the grim King of Terrors.

"Yes, major, he has gone to his last account, and the next Indian trail he follows will be in the happy hunting-grounds."

Alva was kneeling by the body; the statement did not strike the girl with any sudden shock, for she had anticipated the worst from the beginning.

She bowed her head for a few moments and hid her face in the bosom of the dead man, who lay on his back with his face upturned to the sky, a peaceful smile upon his lips, as though the death-stroke had come to him quietly in his bed, instead of having his life thread cut in twain by the bullet of a ruthless foe.

The soldiers had gathered around—the command had halted in a little open glade—and deep sympathy was expressed upon every face.

Then Alva rose to her feet: no tears were in the eyes of the disguised girl, but there was a look upon her face which plainly revealed how

deep was the grief which filled her soul at the untimely taking off of her only protector.

"I am sorry for you, my boy," said the major, kindly. "It is a hard thing to lose a father, but you must remember that we must all pay the debt of nature some day; man is not immortal and must die."

"Yes, very true, but it came hard, all the same," Alva replied, sadly.

"How about the disposal of the body?" the surgeon asked. "Will you have it interred here or carry it to the camp?"

"What are your wishes on the subject?" Major Benteen asked, addressing Alva.

"Let him be buried here in the wilderness, which he has made his home for the last forty years," Alva replied.

"Very well, it shall be as you say. And as he has died a soldier's death, by the bullet of a foe, we will give him a soldier's burial and a soldier's grave," Major Benteen remarked.

The officer was as good as his word.

Mart Kruger, the old mountain man, was buried on the spot where he had fallen, with all the honors of war, and the report of the volley of musketry, as the soldiers discharged their pieces over his grave, woke the echoes of the surrounding hills.

The ceremony performed, the command again proceeded on its way.

"You may rest assured that I shall use all possible means to capture and punish this young buck for his unprovoked murder of your father," Major Benteen had said to Alva just before the advance began. "I feel certain that I would know the fellow again if I saw him, and there is not much doubt about his being one of Serape Colorado's band, and even if I am not able to identify him, it will be an easy matter by the means of a few acute spies to find out who he is, for these Indians are great boasters, particularly the young bucks, and the fellow who committed this outrage will never be able to keep quiet about it."

"When he gets back to his tribe he will be sure to brag about the way in which he shot the white chief, and so I will be able to get at him."

Alva nodded assent.

"And the moment I discover who he is I will nail him," the major continued. "Yes, I will have him if I have to fight all the red devils in the Apache-Land, and after I once get him in my clutches, I will see that he pays the penalty of the law. The shot which killed your father was undoubtedly aimed at me."

Alva thanked the major for this assurance, but expressed no opinion about the matter.

When the march was taken up, the two adventurers took their places in the rear of the troopers.

"Do your best to cheer the young fellow up," Major Benteen had remarked when Talbot had said that Alva intended to ride in the rear and that he should accompany him. "This has been an awful blow to him, and I feel all the more sorry for it, for I know him to be a decent, civil, quiet lad, a decided contrast to the rough boys usually to be found on the border."

Talbot said that he would do all in his power to console the lad, but, after the march began, it was a good half-hour before any conversation passed between the two.

Both rode along, deep in their own thoughts. Alva was the first to break the silence.

"This has been an unlucky quest," he remarked.

"Yes, remarkably so," Talbot replied.

"Yet we may thank the goodness of Heaven that we have escaped with our lives, for it is a miracle almost that our scalps are not now hanging in an Apache wigwam."

"It was a narrow shave."

"And you have been exposed to all this peril for nothing, for now that my father is dead the secret of the hidden treasure is lost."

"You are not acquainted, then, with the place where the nuggets are to be found?"

"No; my father had superstitious notions in regard to this secret, and he fancied that if he communicated the knowledge to any one, it would bring him ill-luck."

Talbot's brows contracted and an earnest look appeared on his face.

"It is very strange," he remarked, slowly and thoughtfully. "It seems absurd to attach any weight to superstitions of this kind, yet in my time I have run across several instances where such things have come so true that it would be impossible for any fair-minded man to dispute that there was something in it."

"Yes, that is so. I have met such cases."

"It may be that nature takes pity upon men who voluntarily tear themselves away from their kind and live near to nature's heart, and grants them an insight into the future, although, as far as my knowledge goes, the privilege has never been of any benefit to the men who had it, for their fate came to them just the same as if they had not been warned in regard to it."

"Very true indeed."

"Now take your father's case. He had a superstition that he must not intrust the secret of where these nuggets were to be found to any one," Talbot remarked, slowly and reflectively.

"He did not confide the secret to me, but he allowed me to go with him in search of them, and I was an utter stranger to him, and the result is that he now sleeps his long sleep in a lonely grave amid the wilderness."

"Yes, but can you, with justice, ascribe that result to the fact that you were with him?" the other asked.

"I think I can, for I feel sure that, indirectly and innocently, I was the cause of his death."

"Why, do you think the shot was fired at you?" Alva questioned, an odd look upon the dark face.

"Oh, no, not at all; I feel sure that it was not."

"You agree, then, with the major that it was his life that this Indian assassin sought?"

"No, no! In my opinion Major Benteen is away off. The shot was not fired either at him or at me, but at you, and the aim was so true, despite the distance, that you came within an ace of being killed."

"Yes, that is what I believe," Alva remarked, slowly.

"And as I said before, I was the innocent cause of the shot being fired."

"Do you think so?" and as the question was put, Alva's eyes were fixed in a dreamy way upon the ground.

"I do most certainly, and in regard to the recognition of the party who fired the shot, I can go a deal further than Major Benteen. He believes that he would know the party if he came in contact with the shooter again. I am certain that I know the party now."

"Yes, so do I."

"It was the Apache tiger-cat, Chico Colorado."

"Yes, the miserable creature, unworthy the name of woman!" Alva exclaimed, bitterly.

"You are right there; she is more like a wild beast than a human, and richly deserves to die."

"And to the accomplishment of that task I have sworn to devote my life!" Alva exclaimed, in deep tones.

"You can count on my aid if you wish it."

"Why should I call upon you to peril your life to aid me, a stranger, in the attempt to revenge myself?"

"Because it is on my account that this Indian she-devil hates you—but for me she would not have attempted your life, therefore I claim the privilege to assist you—to tender a brother's aid."

"I will accept it in the same spirit in which it is given!" Alva exclaimed, and the two clasped hands.

CHAPTER XXX.

PLANNING THE EXPEDITION.

"Now then that we are pards, enlisted on a mission of vengeance, let us see how we will set about it," Dick Talbot remarked.

"Yes, we must plan carefully so that we will be sure to succeed," Alva observed.

"In the first place, I take it for granted that there isn't any use of us two attempting to do anything alone."

"No, the attempt would be madness, for the Indians are now on the alert, and probably will be so for some time."

"True, and this she-wolf will be shrewd enough to know that you will not rest until you have avenged the murder of your father, and so she, with her red braves, will be on the watch."

"Oh, yes; she already has had a taste of my quality, and now I regret that when she attempted my life that I did not strike my knife to her heart, as she would have stricken hers to mine; but it was a bloodthirsty act, and I shrunk from it. Ah! if I had only known then what I know now!" Alva exclaimed, with bitter accent.

"Yes, if a human's foresight was only as good as his hindsight, we would have a much easier time in this rough world," Dick Talbot remarked, with the air of a philosopher. "But as it isn't we must do the best we can under the circumstances."

"Now, then, since it is utterly out of the question for the pair of us to attempt to do anything alone, it follows that we must raise a force of good men, strong enough in numbers to be able to give these red bucks all the fight they want."

"That will take a goodly number of men," Alva observed, thoughtfully.

"Yes, it will."

"In the village of Serape Colorado there must be upward of four hundred warriors."

"Fully that! In fact, from what I saw during our captivity there I should say that he has nearer five hundred braves than four."

"Yes, I agree with you there."

"But, if I have the pick of the ground, with twenty-five good men, armed with the best weapons that money can buy I should not be afraid to encounter Serape Colorado and his four or five hundred warriors," Talbot remarked.

There was nothing boastful in the way he spoke, but he talked with the assurance of a man who was confident in regard to what he said.

"Yes, twenty-five good men, armed with good weapons, and used to Indian warfare, posted in a strong position, would be able to more than hold their own against a host of red-skins," Alva observed.

"And then, you must take into consideration, too, the fact that it is not likely that all the warriors that Serape has with him now will be certain to remain in the village," Talbot observed, speaking with the confidence of one who was well-informed regarding the Indians.

"They have had a successful hunt to the eastward of the Mogollon Range, and at present they are busy in preparing their meat and skins," Dick Talbot continued. "But that task will soon be ended, and as the buffalo are moving to the southwest, the braves will soon be after them again, so that if we wait for a couple of weeks the chances are great that Serape Colorado's village will not contain more than two hundred warriors, perhaps not over a hundred."

"Very true."

"I regard it as being certain that the chief will keep a good force with him, for he will be apt to suspect that we will return, and will be on the lookout, for now there is not only the inducement of the gold to urge us on, but also the desire to revenge the death of your father."

"Yes, and I will never rest content until that is done!" Alva exclaimed.

"Neither will I," Dick Talbot remarked, in his quiet way, but there was that in his deep tones which revealed that he meant what he said, and would hold to the words as strictly as though he had sworn it.

"Now, the game is first to get our men, then provide the arms, and march into the Apache-Land."

"We will proceed cautiously at first, moving only by night, so as to get into the very heart of the Indian country before the red-skins are aware of our presence."

"The pretext that we will give out to our men is that we are in search of the spot where the golden nuggets lie, and while we are about it, we will try and see if we can't strike the gold."

"According to what your father said we were only a short distance from the spot when we were attacked by the Apaches."

"Yes, only a mile or so."

"And as it is somewhere along the river, or on some little creek which falls into the main stream more likely, I think the chances are good that we will be able to discover the hiding-place of the nuggets."

"We can try at all events."

"Then when we reach a spot where nature has arranged it so that we will be provided with a strong position, we will throw precaution to one side and act in such a way that the Apaches will speedily discover the fact of our being in the neighborhood. They will advance to the attack, eager to secure our scalps, and then we must do our best to make it warm for them."

"The scheme seems to be a good one," Alva remarked after thinking the matter over for a moment.

"Our game is to lead the Apaches into a trap," Dick Talbot remarked. "We must manage so that the red-skins will have no suspicion that we have more than four or five men with us; then, when they find that we have taken up a position on their territory, they will be apt to think they can overwhelm us with a sudden rush, after they discover we are not disposed to surrender. Of course they will try to work that game first."

"Oh, yes, as they did before."

"Exactly, and when they find that we are stubborn, the chances are a hundred to one that they will go for us red-hot, so as to wipe us out in short order."

The dark eyes of the disguised girl gleamed as in her imagination she pictured the surprise of the Apaches, and the slaughter which would ensue.

"The bloodthirsty brutes will be caught in their own snare!" she exclaimed.

"Yes, that is my calculation. Thinking that there is only a few of us, they will rush madly to the attack, and we will be able to inflict a terrible loss upon them before they wake to the consciousness that they have caught a Tartar."

"My idea is to select a spot for the fight as near to the Indian village as possible, so that after the attack is repulsed we can pursue the red-skins and run them right into their own wigwams."

"Yes, we must strike them a blow such as they have not received for years, or else our vengeance will be far from being complete!" Alva exclaimed, eagerly, and then the disguised girl added:

"You can see that I am becoming as bloodthirsty, and as anxious for human slaughter as this wildcat of an Indian princess."

"But with this difference, Dick Talbot replied. "You have a reason for it, while in Chico Colorado it proceeds simply from the fact that she is a wildcat at heart. Surely, no one in this world ever had more reason to crave revenge than yourself, for you have suffered a loss which can never be made good to you."

"If you succeed in destroying the fiend-like

wretches who are at the bottom of the tragedy you obtain revenge, but not reparation, for that is impossible."

"Very true; what is done, is done, and cannot be undone; the wheels of Time's chariot cannot be turned backward in their flight. If I were a true Christian I suppose I would be willing to forgive the enemies who have wrought me such a deadly wrong, but I am not. The fearful tragedy has made me fully as savage as any red-skin in the land, and I fairly hunger for revenge."

"I do not blame you, for I feel the same way myself, and yet I have not suffered as you have."

"No; for, thanks to this passion which you inspired in the breast of the Indian princess, you would have been made a very king among them if you had only consented to join the red-men," Alva remarked.

"Well, as to that, if I had been a prudent man, and calculated upon the subject, I might have come to the conclusion that the love of such a tiger-cat as Chico Colorado was quite apt to be as dangerous to its object as its enmity."

"But you did not calculate in that way!" Alva exclaimed. "I am sure you did not! Both the girl and her love were distasteful to you, and you did not stop to consider about the matter at all."

"I suppose I will have to admit that that is the truth," Talbot replied.

"And now there is another point that I must speak about!" Alva said, abruptly.

"Go ahead!"

"This scheme which you have planned is one of difficulty and danger, and it is I who will be benefited by it if it succeeds, and it seems as if I ought not to ask you to risk your life."

"Ah, now you are away off!" Dick Talbot exclaimed, half in jest, half in earnest. "Was not your father my pard, and is it not the rule of all such associations in this wild Western land that pards are like brothers, one for all and all for one?"

"Yes; it is the truth."

"I am bound by all the laws of honor to avenge his death," the other declared, firmly. "He was to me as a brother; he came to his death in my company, and I should be false to the best instincts of a man if I did not do all in my power to avenge his death; so please say no more in regard to that."

Tears appeared in the dark eyes of the disguised girl. She was touched by the frank avowal.

Impulsively she extended her hand and a warm clasp was exchanged between the two.

"There, that is settled; and now we will discuss the plan of operation," Talbot remarked. "We are bound for Fort McDowell; Phoenix is the nearest big town, and we will go on to that point, and I have no doubt that in Phoenix we can get all the men we want."

"Yes; I am well acquainted there."

CHAPTER XXXI.

AN UNWELCOME DISCOVERY.

In due time the expedition arrived at Fort McDowell, and there the two adventurers parted with the soldiers after many expressions of good will on both sides.

The pair pushed on to Phoenix, and on the way discussed in regard to raising the armed force with which they intended to invade the Apache-Land.

"We must keep the matter quiet," Dick Talbot observed. "For it is important in the highest degree that no one shall know that such an expedition is contemplated. Even the very men whom we engage to go with us must be kept in ignorance of our destination."

"Yes, I should judge that would be best," Alva remarked.

"It will be easy enough to tell the old story of the lost mine, and locate it somewhere to the east of Phoenix; we can follow the course of the Salt River when we start, and after getting beyond the reach of observation we can strike off to the north."

"Oh, yes; that can be easily done."

"As I said before, it is important to keep our plans a secret, for if it came to the knowledge of the military commanders that we intended to invade Serape Colorado's domain with a large force, they would be sure to interfere and try to keep us from going, for white men have no business in the Apache-Land, and then, for our sake, they would try to stop our march, fearing that the red chief and his warriors would make mince-meat out of us."

"It is very probable."

"And then there is another reason," Talbot continued. "I know this red butcher very well by reputation, and have heard many stories in regard to how he has run things on the border; I have heard it stated that he has white spies in the frontier towns who warn him where there is a good opportunity for a raid, and also give him timely notice when the troops start out against him."

"Yes; I have heard that story, too, but whether there is any truth in it or not I am unable to say."

"We must proceed on the assumption that it

is true, for in a difficult game like this we cannot afford to throw a point away."

"No doubt about that."

"Now, in regard to enlisting our men; it will not be prudent to have them gather in a town like Phoenix, for the spectacle of twenty-odd men loitering around town, without any apparent reason for being in the place, would be sure to excite remark and give rise to suspicions."

"Undoubtedly!"

"And then, notwithstanding the care with which the men may be selected, among so large a number there is almost certain to be some fellow who will not be able to hold his tongue, no matter how strongly he is warned to keep quiet, and as it will take three or four days to get our men together—perhaps more—one indiscreet talker would give the scheme away."

"Why not select some isolated point—some ranch far enough away from Phoenix so that there will not be likely to be any communication between it and the town, and have the men rendezvous there after being engaged?" Alva suggested.

"You have anticipated what I was going to say," Talbot replied. "That is the exact plan I was about to recommend. Another point, too, is not to allow the men to know how large the force is to be, for if it was understood that we were going to carry a big outfit it would be apt to create suspicions. Prospecting parties ranging in number from five to ten men are common enough, particularly if the route is to lead into the Indian country, where it is probable that there may be trouble with the reds, but when it comes to an expedition of twenty-five, then it would appear as if war was intended."

"Most certainly it would," Alva assented.

"We will hunt up a ranch, and engage it to serve as the headquarters of a hunting party. You can remain there while I drum up the recruits. I will arrange the matter so that the men will all arrive at the ranch on the same day, and then, before the fact that there is so large a body of men in the neighborhood gives rise to any talk, we will be on the march."

"I do not see any objections to the plan," the other remarked, after thinking over the matter for a few minutes.

"But there is one point upon which you have not touched, and it seems to me that it is an extremely vital one," the disguised girl continued after a brief pause.

"What is it?"

"In regard to money; to enlist twenty-five good men and provide them with arms of the latest pattern will require no small sum; and such men too as we must have—good men, who can be depended upon—are not to be got for small wages."

Dick Talbot laughed.

"You are right there!" he exclaimed. "The point you have raised is a most important one. It is an old proverb, money is the sinews of war, and it is an extremely true one, and although it was a favorite saying of the first Napoleon that heaven is usually on the side of the heaviest artillery, yet it would be truer to say, that is the largest purse which usually wins."

"Yes," assented Alva, who had been making a mental calculation while the other was speaking.

"Let me see: to put twenty-five men into the field will cost, at the least calculation, a hundred dollars a day."

"That is about the figure; good men are worth about twenty-five dollars a week and their grub, which will be about three dollars a week more, bringing the cost up to about four dollars a day for seven days."

"To journey into the Apache-Land, execute our vengeance and return will take how long?" Alva asked.

"Well, say thirty days," Talbot replied, after thinking over the matter for a moment. "We ought to be able to do the work in that time."

"That is three thousand dollars, and I cannot command over three hundred!" exclaimed the disguised girl with a despairing gesture.

"Do not allow that to trouble you!" Dick Talbot exclaimed. "I am rich enough to be able to spare three thousand dollars—or five thousand for that matter—to avenge the pard who was killed by my side."

Despite her iron will, tears came into the dark eyes of Alva.

"You have a heart of gold, and Heaven will surely reward you for this noble act!"

The speech was delivered in broken accents, and the tone plainly showed that it came straight from the heart.

"Oh, that is all right," Talbot replied, carelessly. "I am only doing what every square man would do."

"I will accept this favor at your hands in the same frank spirit in which it is tendered!" Alva exclaimed. "But on this condition, that you must permit me to repay you some day the sum which you expend."

"Don't trouble yourself about that. It is my calculation that we will strike the place where these nuggets are deposited, and if we are lucky enough to do that, we will both of us have all the money we need."

"Yes, that is true!" Alva exclaimed, and a brighter look came over the dark features.

"Well, now that the plan of operations is agreed upon, we must not lose any time in getting to work. It will be a few days, though, before I will be able to commence operations, for I must pay a visit to the southern part of the Territory where my ranch is located, so as to provide myself with funds, and then, too, I can probably pick up eight or ten good men there. There are two in particular, now on my ranch, who are old pals of mine, and have been with me in some pretty serious adventures, and these two men I count as worth a dozen ordinary fellows."

"Such recruits will be well worth having."

"Yes, but the first thing is to find the ranch to serve as a headquarters."

Fortune favored the adventurers in regard to this.

A small ranch on the Salt River, some twenty miles from Phoenix, run by a Mexican, was right in the pathway of the pair, the two arriving there just as the shades of evening were falling.

They halted there for the night, and had no difficulty in making an arrangement with the owner, who was a quiet, rather stupid old fellow who did not see that there was anything out of the way in a hunting-party taking his house for a headquarters.

If he had suspected, though, that it was the red Apaches of Serape Colorado's band who were to serve as game, his astonishment would, undoubtedly, have been great.

The next morning, Dick Talbot started for his home, going by the way of the town of Phoenix.

It was his idea to take a look at the place so as to see what chance he stood to get recruits there.

Phoenix, at the time of which we write, was having quite a boom, and there were plenty of men in the town, so the sport resolved to remain for a day in order to be able to look about him.

He took a room at the principal hotel in the place, and then proceeded to "do" the town.

Like all places on the frontier the drinking-saloons and gaming dens were the principal places of resort.

Talbot thought that he might be able to meet some acquaintance who could post him in regard to matters, but as it chanced, there did not seem to be a soul in the town whom he knew.

It was not a difficult matter for a jovial man like Talbot to make acquaintances though, particularly in a wild, Western camp, and so he soon ascertained all the facts he needed.

The "boom" in the town had been overdone; things had not panned out half as well as the seekers after fortune had expected, and there were quite a number of good men in the camp who were anxious to get away.

It was a favorable opportunity, and the sport saw that he would be able to secure all the fighting men he wanted at a reasonable figure.

Talbot had lounged around town, as though merely bent on killing time, while seeking information, but he kept his eyes open as usual, and about nightfall came to the conclusion—from certain circumstances—that a spy was dogging at his heels.

"I must find out the meaning of this little game before I sleep!" the sport exclaimed.

CHAPTER XXXII.

A SURPRISE.

"THIS is really a mystery! Why should any one take the trouble to play the spy on me, a stranger in this town?" Talbot exclaimed, when he had come to the conclusion that a spy was upon his track.

The fellow whom he suspected was a burly, black-bearded man, who looked like a Mexican.

He was shabbily dressed, and had a most decidedly hang-dog look.

As we have said, Talbot was a man who was used to keeping his eyes open, and he had first noticed the man in the hotel while he was making arrangements for his room.

The fellow had lounged up to the counter behind which the landlord stood, and while apparently paying no attention to the conversation going on between the host and the sport, yet got himself into such a position that he could overhear all that was said.

Talbot did not pay any particular attention to the circumstance at the time, thinking the man was merely a curious fellow who had nothing better to do than to pry into other people's business.

The adventurer though, from the mere force of habit, took a good look at the eavesdropper, but he managed the matter so skillfully that the man was not conscious the sport had noticed his presence.

After making his arrangement at the hotel, Talbot had proceeded to look around the town, as we have described, and it did not take him long to discover that the dark-browed Mexican was following him.

In the first saloon he entered, after having been there for five or six minutes, he happened to glance at the door and caught sight of the Mexican entering.

If the man had walked straight into the place

like an ordinary citizen, the sport would have been tempted to think that his being there was only a coincidence, but the Mexican came skulking into the saloon behind three men, evidently having waited for some such chance and thus immediately aroused Talbot's suspicions.

"The fellow is afraid of being seen," he murmured, "and so he waited until he could slip in behind somebody. Now then, the question arises, who is he after?"

In a short time the sport got into conversation with a party who were discussing the prospects of the town, and while pretending to be deeply interested in the talk kept on the lookout for the Mexican.

As he had expected, as soon as the fellow saw that he was busy in conversation he stealthily approached in his rear and came close enough to overhear what the party were saying, although apparently paying no attention to the conversation.

"What the deuce is the rascal up to?" Talbot muttered. "What possible interest can he have in overhearing my conversation?"

It was a mystery, and the more that the sport reflected upon the matter the greater he was puzzled.

As far as he could see there was but one reasonable explanation.

The Mexican had made a mistake, and he was being watched in place of some other man.

Although Talbot felt pretty sure by this time that there wasn't any doubt about the matter and that the Mexican was dogging his footsteps, yet he resolved to test the matter thoroughly, and so he sauntered from one popular place of resort to another, all the time keeping his eyes open to see if the man kept after him.

The fellow was as constant in his attentions as his shadow, and as time passed away Talbot grew more and more annoyed.

As far as the adventurer could see the watcher was extremely desirous of overhearing his conversation, and this rendered the matter still more perplexing.

Why was the man so anxious to hear what he had to say to these strangers whom he encountered?

In reality the conversation did not amount to anything. The men with whom he spoke did about all of the talking, Talbot's only purpose in engaging in these conversations being to learn what prospect there was for him to engage men for his expedition into the Apache country, but from the guarded way in which he spoke it was impossible for any one to guess in regard to his object.

Apparently he was trying to find out whether the town would be a good one for him to locate in or not.

After he got his supper at the restaurant attached to the hotel—the particular one at which Talbot stopped did not furnish board and rooms, but rooms only, and the guests got their meals where they liked—the sport saw the Mexican lounging in front of the place evidently waiting for him to come out.

Seeing a favorable opportunity when the attention of the spy was attracted to two men in the street, who were under the influence of liquor and seemed likely to get into a fight, Talbot spoke about the man to the landlord with the idea of finding out who he was.

"I think I know that party out yonder—that Mexican chap," he remarked, to the landlord. "Or, at all events, his face is very familiar to me. I met him down at Tucson, I reckon. I mean that fellow with the black beard."

The landlord took a good look at the man and then he shook his head.

"No savvy," he replied. "He is a stranger hyer. I disremember ever seeing him before, but I reckon from his looks that he is a Mexican fast enough."

"Yes, I reckon so, but now that I come to look at the fellow again, it seems to me that he isn't the man I knew."

"Darn me if I kin ever tell these Greasers one from t'other!" the landlord exclaimed. "They are like niggers and Chinamen—all look 'bout alike."

"Yes, that is so," Talbot assented, and then he sauntered out of the hotel.

One important fact he had learned: the man was a stranger in the town, evidently, or otherwise the landlord of the principal hotel would have been pretty sure to have known him.

"Now, we will commence this picnic again," Dick Talbot remarked, as he strolled up the street, cast a wary glance behind him, and saw that the Mexican was following in his footsteps, as he had anticipated.

Before the night is over I will make this black-bearded rascal show his hand, or else I am not the man I think I am."

During the evening Dick Talbot wandered from saloon to saloon, just to pass the time away, and the Mexican dogged his footsteps with rare fidelity, and whenever the sport engaged in conversation with any one, the spy always drew as near as possible so as to overhear what was said.

Eleven o'clock came at last, and Talbot concluded it was about time for him to put into execution the plan which he had formed.

He was in conversation with a party of miners when the hands of the clock on the wall pointed to eleven, and glancing at the time-piece, Talbot remarked:

"Hallo! I had no idea that it was so late. I have an appointment to meet a party on a little business matter at eleven, and I must be off; so—long!" and Talbot departed.

This statement was for the benefit of the spy, and the sport felt certain that after hearing it the spy would follow him more diligently than ever, for it would appear to him that there was a prospect of his gaining some important information.

Talbot's judgment was correct; the spy followed him from the saloon as he had expected, and dogged him up the street, the sport ascertaining this fact from a sly glance cast backward over his shoulder.

The adventurer hurried on at a brisk pace like a man who had an appointment to keep and was afraid of being late.

The night was rather a dark one, for though there was a moon, it was only a feeble one, and half the time its light was concealed by passing clouds.

Talbot went on through the town into the open country beyond, and when he had got well out on the trail he took advantage of a turn in the road which for a few moments took him out of sight of the spy, who had been compelled to remain some distance in the rear for fear of being discovered, to conceal himself behind a clump of bushes.

Drawing his revolver he crouched in ambush and waited for the Mexican.

Soon the spy made his appearance, stealing along with the stealthy step of the tiger closing in on his prey, but when he turned the bend in the trail and made the discovery that the man whom he was tracking had disappeared—the moon happened to come out particularly strong just at that moment, so that the surrounding country was plainly revealed—he came to a halt, and his face well expressed the astonishment he felt.

"Caramba! what does this mean?" he exclaimed, speaking English as fluently as though it was his native tongue.

"Where has he gone? Has he vanished into the air or sunk into the earth?"

"I will swear that I saw him turn this point, and there is no side trail here anywhere on which he could go."

The fellow was not quite near enough to the point where Talbot was concealed for him to execute the purpose which he had formed, so he was compelled to wait.

The Mexican gazed around him in a bewildered way and then rubbed his eyes as though he fancied that his vision had deceived him.

"I do not understand it—it is wonderful!" he cried. "Where has he gone? A minute or two ago he was in plain sight and now there is no more signs of him than if he had vanished into the air like a spirit; but he was no spirit; some of these North Americans are human devils, but they hav'n't the power to disappear into the air."

"Where has he gone?"

And as he put the question the Mexican advanced, coming within a yard of the brush behind which Talbot was concealed.

This was the opportunity for which the adventurer waited.

With the spring of a tiger he leaped from behind the bush and dealt the Mexican a fearful blow on the head with the butt of his revolver.

Over went the man, felled by the powerful stroke.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

BROUGHT TO BOOK.

NEVER was there a man more surprised, but the attack was made so suddenly, and the blow upon the head was so severe, that the Mexican was hurled into insensibility before he had any idea that a foe was near.

All that he was conscious of was the sudden appearance of a dark form—a terrific blow on the head, and then he sunk in unconsciousness.

When he came to himself again he found that he was reposing in a clump of bushes, some distance from the trail, with both wrists and ankles securely bound.

He was in a reclining position, with his back against a big boulder which cropped out of the earth in front of the pines.

Before him was the man upon whom he had been playing the spy.

For a minute or two after his senses returned to him, the Mexican blinked his eyes like an owl brought suddenly into the light; his mind was still so confused that he did not exactly understand what had taken place.

Perceiving that the Mexican had recovered from his insensibility, Dick Talbot drew a revolver from his belt and proceeded to deliberately cock the weapon.

The Mexican watched him narrowly.

The adventurer after raising the hammer of the pistol proceeded to click the cylinder around, as if he wanted to be certain that the revolver was

in good working order, the Mexican watching him with distended eyes.

Then, after having apparently satisfied his mind on this point, he leveled the pistol full at the breast of the Mexican, at the same time fixing his keen eyes upon his face, and remarked:

"Stranger, I reckon that your time in this world is mighty short. About five minutes for you to say a prayer or two, and try to think of your sins—and, maybe, there are some parties to whom you would like to send a parting word—"

"What do you mean?" cried the Mexican, hoarsely. "Do you intend to murder me?"

"I reckon that is about the idea," Dick Talbot replied, coolly. "In about five minutes, if this revolver is good for anything, you will get your ticket to the happy hunting-grounds, that is, if the Great Spirit sees fit to check your baggage that way, but from what I have seen of you the idea comes to me that you are going to have a heap of trouble in getting through."

"Why do you want to kill me—what did I ever do to you?" the Mexican demanded.

"Well, nothing much," Dick Talbot replied, slowly, as if he was deliberating over the matter. "I have kinder got it in for you on general principles. I reckon that you are a bad man, and ought to be killed, and so I am going to salivate you."

"But that would be murder!" the Mexican exclaimed, so astonished by the cool, matter-of-fact way in which the other spoke that he knew not what to make of it, and the only way he could account for the strange actions of the man who had taken him so completely by surprise was that the American was not in his right mind.

The average Mexican has usually an idea that the boasting, blustering "North Americans" are more or less insane, and although in this case Talbot appeared to be as cool as a cucumber, displaying none of the bravado of the frontier bully, yet, for all that, the victim fancied he was in the hands of a lunatic.

"No, no, not murder, justice!" Talbot replied. "Call me the executioner who is about to punish a criminal for crimes for which he deserves to die, and you will about hit it."

The swarthy Mexican fairly turned pale, for there was something in the tone in which the adventurer spoke which struck terror to his very soul.

"What do you know about me that you thus condemn me to death?" the Mexican cried.

"You are a scoundrel!" Talbot retorted. "Any one can see that in your face!"

"But you know nothing about me—I am a stranger to you, and why you should lay in wait and thus assault me is a mystery!"

"Yes, almost as great a mystery as why you have been dogging me around town all day," Talbot retorted.

The fellow started, for this accusation took him entirely by surprise.

"I dog you?" he stammered, at a loss for words.

"Yes, that is what I said, and it is the truth, too, you know that well enough."

"No, no, it is not so!"

"Yes it is! Come, come, it will not do you any good to deny it!" Talbot declared. "I am no fool, nor am I a tenderfoot, unused to the ways of this wild Western land. I spotted you the first thing this morning, right after I struck the town, when I was in the hotel arranging for a room; you tried to play the listener then so as to overhear what I had to say to the landlord."

"No, no, you are mistaken, it is not so!" the man protested, earnestly.

"It will not improve your position for you to deny it. I know that is so. Then, you followed me around town; wherever I went, you went, and whenever I got into conversation with any one, you always got into a position so as to be able to overhear what I had to say. Don't try to lie out of it now for I know that it is the truth."

"But it is ridiculous!" the man asserted. "You are a stranger to me and I to you. What do I care about you?"

"That is just exactly the question which is puzzling me," Talbot replied. "And that is what I am anxious to find out."

"But it is not so; you have made a mistake. There is not any reason why I should play the spy upon you, and a man does not go to the trouble of doing such a thing for nothing."

"Very well argued," the sport remarked. "And, to be honest with you, that is just what I said to myself, and that is why I laid this little trap for you."

"A trap!" cried the other with a sullen scowl.

"Yes, this trap into which you have fallen. After I became satisfied that you were playing the spy upon me, I made up my mind to bring you to book—so to speak—but force you to give an account of yourself, but I did not make any move until after dark as I knew a scheme could not be well worked in the daytime."

"This little yarn that I got off about having an appointment at eleven o'clock was all humbug, of course—merely a dodge to get you out of the town, so I could be able to get a chance at you."

The look upon the face of the Mexican was

almost indescribable as he listened to the sport's revelation, for not until this moment did he realize that he was the victim of a deep-laid plot.

"You begin to get the idea into your head now, I see," the adventurer continued. "You begin to see how the cat jumps. It was my game, of course, to get you out of the town—to get you to a lonely spot where I would be able to put the screws on—to talk to you in a way that you would not be likely to misunderstand."

"You are in an extremely tight place, my friend, and I hope that you are conscious of the fact."

"The hour is late and few people are likely to pass this way, and, for all practical purposes, you are about as much at my mercy, with as little chance of any one being able to interfere in your behalf, as though I had you on an uninhabited island."

The fellow was visibly troubled, for he knew that his captor had not overstated the difficulties of his situation.

Talbot paused, so that the Mexican might have a minute or two to ponder over his words, and then he went on:

"I hold your life at my mercy," he remarked.

"And I can tell you that in such a case as this I am inclined to be a pretty hard customer."

"There is only one chance for you. Make a clean breast of it and I may not kill you."

The Mexican was a dogged fellow, and although Talbot spoke with the tones of a man who was not to be trifled with, the watcher made another attempt to lie out of it.

"But this is not the truth," he protested. "I tell you that you have made a mistake. There isn't any reason why I should play the spy upon you, and men do not try such games without a cause."

"Your race has a reputation for being an obstinate one, and it is evident that you are a good representative of it," Talbot rejoined.

"You speak very plausibly indeed, but all the words in the world will not save your bacon this time."

"Come, my man, I am getting impatient, and I don't propose to waste any more time upon you."

"Can't you get it through your thick head that I laid a trap for you and that you have tumbled into it?"

"I know that you have assaulted me without reason," the Mexican answered, in a surly way.

"Oh, no; there was plenty of reason for the act," Talbot replied. "You have been playing the spy upon me ever since I came to town. I suppose there was some reason for it, of course, for you would never have taken so much trouble without cause, and my curiosity was excited to know why I, a stranger in the town, should be watched as though it was suspected that I was a fugitive escaped from justice."

There was a quick movement of the eyes of the Mexican as the adventurer uttered these words which did not escape the keen orbs of the sport.

"And as I am a very inquisitive fellow," Talbot continued, "I determined to get you into a hole and so force you to speak."

"Now don't waste time with any more lies, but give me the truth. I heard what you said when you discovered I had disappeared, and no lies will save you."

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE CONFESSION.

THE man was silent for a few moments, apparently meditating over the matter, for his brow was wrinkled with thought and his eyes were cast upon the ground.

Then he raised his head and said:

"If I speak, will you release me?"

"Yes, if you make a clean breast of it, but don't try any games, you know," Talbot answered. "Don't try to pull the wool over my eyes with any yarn, for you can bet all the money you can raise that I will be able to decide whether you are telling me the truth or not."

"Oh, I will give it to you square, of course!" the man declared, with an attempt to look honest.

"It will not be well for you if you don't!" the sport warned. "I give you fair notice that when I get ugly I am as merciless as a tiger. I hold you here under the muzzle of my revolver, and no power in this world will be able to save you from instant death if you do not satisfy me!"

The Mexican looked Dick Talbot in the eye as he spoke, and the determination he saw there made him uneasy, but for all that he thought he could "fool" the North American.

"Oh, well, I will tell you the truth," he said. "I know that you have me foul, and as I am in a bad scrape I might as well get out of it the best way I can," striving to speak with an appearance of great candor.

"That is an extremely wise conclusion," the sport observed. "And it shows that your head is level."

"When a man gets into a tight place, the

quicker he discovers the fact and proceeds to get out of it, the better it is for him."

"Yes, that is what I think."

Yet, despite this declaration, there was something in the manner of the Mexican which gave Dick Talbot the impression that the man was not going to tell him the truth.

The Mexicans, as a race, are notoriously tricky, and the sport had come to the conclusion that he had got hold of a particularly bad specimen, so he gave him another warning.

"Mind, stranger, I want the truth out of you, and nothing but the truth, so help you Bob!" he exclaimed.

"Under the circumstances you may think that a lie will serve you just as well, but it will not, and I hope you will not allow any such belief to run away with you. Don't flatter yourself that you will be able to deceive me, for it is dollars to cents that no such game will work, and I give you fair warning that I will come down on you like a thousand of bricks if you try to humbug me!"

The Mexican assumed an injured air.

"Your threats are useless; I am going to tell you the truth!" he declared.

"That is what I want! That is just what I am hankering after! So go ahead as fast as you can, but if you try any gum-game, before you get half-way through I will go for you in such a way as to make you wish you had never been born."

"I am going to tell you the truth, and if you were to kill me it wouldn't make any difference," the other observed in a sulky way.

"Now, stranger, I warn you that I will be able to tell whether you are speaking the truth or not, although you may think that it will not be possible for me to do so, but it is, and if you have formed any little scheme in your mind whereby you think you can get out of this hole without making a full and free confession, you had better not try it on for it will not be well for you."

"Oh, you'll get the truth!" the man protested, but there was an ugly look in his eyes which belied his words.

"Well, I hope so, for I am not a particularly bloodthirsty man by nature, and I am not really hankering after your gore; still, if you are not inclined to do as I say, I will put you in a condition for planting with a quickness of dispatch that will command your astonishment if it does not win your admiration."

This speech was a little beyond the comprehension of the Mexican, so he shook his head and again protested that he was an honest man, and would not lie even to save his life.

Both of which statements Dick Talbot felt sure were false.

"Go ahead and let me hear your yarn."

"It is true that I have been playing the spy upon you—"

"That is all right, I know that. Don't waste time by telling me what I already know. I am anxious to hear something that I don't know."

"There is a reason for it of course."

"That is what I am after—the reason—spit it out as fast as possible, for it is getting late, and though I shall probably hate to tear myself away from the society of so charming a gentleman as yourself, yet it has to be done all the same."

"I was anxious to learn how long you intended to stay in Phoenix, and where you intended to go when you left the town."

"That was why you were so anxious to overhear the conversations that I engaged in?"

"Yes."

"Well, did you succeed?"

The Mexican shook his head.

"Ah, I had an idea that you did not succeed in gaining much information."

"You asked questions, but when any one questioned you, not much information did they get."

"Exactly! that was my little game; learn all I could and give up as little about myself as possible, and I think you will admit that I managed the business with considerable skill."

"Yes, I did not learn anything."

"No, and you would not, even if I had not suspected that you were playing the spy upon me. It isn't my custom to go about the streets of a strange town and tell my business to every man-jack I meet."

"So it seems."

"Now then, maybe, you think you have given me a heap of information, but I don't see it in that light," Talbot remarked. "I knew, without putting you to the trouble of telling me, that you were trying to find out all you could about me; if you hadn't been so anxious you would not have been so easily led upon this wild-goose chase, to-night; but now the question before the meeting is, why did you do this? What difference did it make to you who or what I was, or where I was going?"

"I am a rancher, and my place is on the Salt River ten miles to the west of Phoenix," the Mexican replied.

"Yes."

"Some time ago I had some horses stolen from me by a band of thieves—Red Jack's band—"

"I see."

And Talbot nodded approvingly as the other hesitated.

"There is a big reward offered for the capture or the killing of Red Jack or any of his band."

"A good idea!" observed the sport, dryly.

"I thought there was a chance that I might get the reward."

"What has this to do with me?"

"You were a stranger in the town—"

"Yes; but there isn't anything suspicious-looking about me, is there?" Talbot demanded.

"Red Jack is a man something about your size, and is so clever at disguising himself that even his most intimate acquaintance cannot recognize him when he is fixed up."

"And you jumped to the conclusion that I might be this Red Jack, eh?"

"Yes, yes."

"That is an extremely likely story!" exclaimed the sport, in a sarcastic tone. "I look as if I was disguised; a man without a beard and with his hair cut short; any one with half an eye could see that I was *disguised* so as to conceal my real looks."

The Mexican appeared uneasy, for Talbot's tone was full of menace.

"Well, I never saw Red Jack, but from the descriptions I have heard given of him I thought that you looked a great deal like him."

"Now, that is likely, too, that a man with a heavy price upon his head—an outlaw who must be well known to the people of this section, should come into the town in broad daylight—without attempting to disguise himself—come to a place where dozens would be glad to seize him so as to claim the reward offered for his capture."

The Mexican looked ugly.

"He is not so well-known," he replied, sulkily.

"Oh, no, of course not; but you thought you could pick him out by his description, although you had never seen the fellow."

"Bosh! why do you attempt to fool me with such a ridiculous lie?"

"It is the truth!" the Mexican protested.

"It is not, and you know it! It is only a tale which you have concocted to throw me off the scent, but you never made a greater blunder in your life than when you started in to fool me with any such yarn."

"Upon my soul, it is the truth!"

"Upon your soul it is a lie!" Talbot thundered. "A lie!" he repeated, "and a mighty clumsy one, too!"

"You a rancher—bah! that is another lie! You don't own a ranch near Phoenix any more than I do, and, from your looks, I greatly doubt if you ever owned more than one horse at a time in your life! One thing is certain—you are no rancher, I can tell that by the cut of your jib; you appear a deuced sight more like a member of an outlaw band, such as you describe this Red Jack's to be, than an honest rancher. I am no stranger to the border, and I have met plenty of such fellows as you are in my time!"

"I swear to you that it is the truth!"

Hardly had the words left his lips when the sharp crack of Dick Talbot's revolver sounded on the air.

The Mexican gave a howl of pain, and endeavored to start up, but was kept from doing so by the lashings around his ankles.

"Oh, heavens, I am killed!" he cried, as he writhed amid the bushes as though he was mortally wounded.

CHAPTER XXXV.

AN UNEXPECTED REVELATION.

To the utter astonishment of the groaning man, Talbot broke out into a loud laugh.

"Ah, cursed American, do you laugh, then, at your murdering work?" the Mexican cried, rendered almost frantic by this inhuman act.

Again Talbot laughed, just as if he thought the matter was an extremely good joke.

"Oh, if I were only free!" howled the captive, and for a man who believed that he was near to death's door, he struggled to break the bonds which bound him with remarkable strength.

But all his efforts were useless, for Talbot had had too much experience in this line not to make a good job of it.

"Oh, if I were only free!" the Mexican repeated. "If I were only free, with my weapons in my hands, I would soon make an end of you, you cowardly murderer!"

"For a dying man you are displaying fine lung power," the sport remarked. "But, between you and me, and the bedpost, you are worth about four hundred dead men."

"I will admit, frankly—for I am a man who often wears his heart upon his sleeve—that I do calculate to murder you before I get through with you, but it is also my intention to have considerable fun with you first."

"There is a good deal of the red-man about me. I have lived among the Indians so much that I have acquired some of their ways—the propensity to torture prisoners, for instance, before putting them to death."

By this time the Mexican had become conscious that he was not badly hurt, although he was

puzzled to account for his escape, as he had felt a sharp pain in his head after his captor fired at him, and therefore jumped to the conclusion that he had been shot in the skull.

"What do you mean? What have you done to me?" he gasped.

"Put a bullet through the lobe of your ear—the left one—pierced it, you know, as for an earring," Talbot replied. "The hole is rather a large one, it is true, but under the circumstances it was the best I could do."

"You have marked me for life!" the Mexican hissed, in a voice hoarse with suppressed rage.

"Yes, but that isn't all I am going to do!" the sport retorted, a merciless look in his dark eyes.

"I told you that I was a bad man to fool with, and I am going to show you that it is the truth."

"I offered to give you your life if you confessed to me who set you on to play the spy upon me, for I have taken your measure, my man, and I understand perfectly well that you are acting as somebody's tool; you are not the master."

"You accepted my offer and then tried to deceive me with this Red Jack yarn, but the trick will not work. I am going to have the truth out of you, if I have to kill you by inches to get it."

Despite his bulldog-like courage and bravado—for the Mexican was brave enough in his way—he looked uneasy; there was a glitter in the eyes of the adventurer which boded evil.

"I have told you the truth," he muttered, sullenly.

"It is of no use for you to stick to that lie, for I know better!" Talbot exclaimed, sternly.

"Now then, I have got through fooling and am going to work in earnest."

"I have drilled a hole through your left ear, in order to show you a sample of my skill, and as a bit of warning, too. Now I will give you five minutes to think over this matter—I am not going to talk any more, mind! I have got through—and at the end of that time, if you don't make a clean breast of it, I will put a hole through your right ear; five minutes more for reflection, and then I will see how deftly I can cut off those curls which dangle over your ears, just grazing the skin, and if these little tricks don't induce you to talk, I will commence on your body and see how many bullets I can put into you without having any of them touch a vital part."

Cold as an iceberg, and seemingly as merciless as fate itself, was Dick Talbot as he delivered his ultimatum.

"Another point!" observed Talbot, abruptly. "You called me a cowardly murderer and cried out that you wished your hands were free so you could show me what you would do if you only had your liberty."

"I did take you by surprise, without giving you any chance for your life. It was my game so to do, and I worked it for all it was worth, but don't you run away with the idea that I am afraid of meeting you in a fair and open fight, because circumstances forced me to play this trick upon you. You are laboring under a big mistake if you think in that way."

"I am not at all afraid to meet you, and if you will give me this information which I seek, I will cut your bonds—the moment I am satisfied that you have told me all you know—and you shall have the fairest, squarest chance for a fight that ever mortal man had in this world."

A ray of hope appeared in the eyes of the Mexican, and the sport, watching his face intently, saw that the man was inclined to accept his offer.

"Well, what do you say—is it a go?" he asked.

"Yes, I will confess, and then afterwards kill you, you cursed American!" the Mexican cried with sudden fierceness.

"I will take my chances for my life as you will have to do for yours," Dick Talbot rejoined.

"Now, go ahead!"

"I was hired to play the spy upon you, and you are right—I am no rancher."

"Oh, I knew that, you don't look at all like one; now if I were to make a guess, I should say that you were more likely to be one of this Red Jack's band."

The expression in the eyes of the Mexican betrayed to Talbot that his chance shot had struck home.

"It is a lie!" the man declared.

"Well, we will not quarrel about that," the sport remarked. "It doesn't make a bit of difference to me whether you are, or are not. The point I want to get at is, who hired you to play the spy upon me?"

"Chico Colorado!" was the reply, and it took Dick Talbot completely by surprise.

"The Apache princess, eh?"

"Yes, the same."

"Well, Miss Chico Colorado must have long arms to be able to reach from the Apache-Land clear to this town of Phoenix," the sport remarked.

"I hang out around Fort McDowell," the Mexican explained. "She sought me there the day after you departed, and employed me to

watch you and the youth who was with you, Mart Kruger's son."

"I found out at the fort that you intended to come to Phoenix, and so I did not bother myself to trail you, but came on direct to the town. By so doing though I made a mistake, as I discovered after you got in, for Chico Colorado's instructions were to keep a closer watch on young Kruger than on you, and if he concluded to settle down, to remain for any length of time at any one point, I was to let her know."

"What was the object of this watch?"

"Now you are too much for me," the man replied with a shake of the head. "All I know is was what I have told you."

Talbot believed that the man was speaking the truth and he asked the question with little hope of obtaining information.

In his own mind though he was satisfied in regard to the matter.

The Apache princess possessed all the savage persistency of the fierce red race from which she sprung.

She hated the disguised girl so bitterly that her death alone would satisfy the Indian maid.

Already she had twice attempted her life, and each time the blow had failed; not discouraged by her failures, she sought for a third chance, but, thanks to the blunder of her agent, this last attempt seemed likely to be as unsuccessful as the other two.

"What were the instructions that you received in regard to me?" the sport asked.

"Just about the same as those about young Kruger. I was to keep my eyes open, find out what you intended to do, and report to her."

"She particularly desired that I should ascertain whether you intended to get any party together with the design of going on an expedition. I understood what Chico meant by this. She thought you were going after gold up in the Apache-Land, and the red bucks are as bitter as poison when they hear of anything of the kind. If there is anything which makes them mad and starts them on the war-path, it is the news that white men are after gold up in their territory."

"So I have heard. Well, is that all?"

"Yes; and you have got the truth this time."

"How was it that Chico Colorado came to get you to do this service for her?"

"Oh, the Apaches and I are old pals; we have done considerable business together," the man replied, with a grin.

Talbot understood the situation.

The Mexican was one of the white Indians, as they are termed, who act as spies for the red-men along the frontier and often accompany them on their raids, disguised as Indians, painted and dressed so like the red-men as not to be distinguished from them.

"Many of them have taken Indian squaws for their wives, and then they are called squaw-men."

"You are a miserable wretch!" the sport exclaimed, in contempt. "It would be a good job to rid the world of such a hound as you are, whose hands are red, no doubt, with the blood of your own race. The chances are that you richly deserve death!"

"Are you going to give me a chance for your life, as you promised?"

"Yes; you can easily work your knife out of your belt and then free yourself. I will wait for you on the trail," replied Dick Talbot.

And then he strode away.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE FATE OF THE MEXICAN.

The moon was now much stronger, and as all the clouds had passed away there was plenty of light for the duel.

Dick Talbot walked down the trail for a couple of hundred feet until he came to a broad, open space, free from rocks and bushes, which he decided would be a good spot for the encounter.

"This fellow is a miserable wretch, and I suppose I ought to kill him if I am able to do so," he muttered, communing with himself, after his old, solitary habit. "But, somehow, I am getting so I hate to shed blood unless it is impossible to avoid it."

"In this case, though, it will be strictly in self-defense, for the fellow will undoubtedly wipe me out if he can, yet if he doesn't come at me too fiercely, so that I will be obliged to put my bullet in a vital part, I will content myself with disabling the scoundrel."

Talbot examined his weapons carefully and recharged the empty chamber, the bullet of which had pierced the Mexican's ear.

"Now, then, I am ready for my gentleman, and he can come on as soon as he likes," the sport remarked, as he replaced one of the revolvers in its holster, and faced about with the other in his hand ready for the fray.

He had been careful to select this open space as the ground for the meeting because he had no faith in the honesty of the Mexican.

Owing to the open nature of the country, it was not possible for the Mexican to approach under cover so as to be able to get a chance to kill him without his being afforded an opportunity to give battle.

From what he had seen of the man he thought him capable of committing a crime of this kind.

The fellow did not succeed in freeing himself from his bonds as speedily as Dick Talbot had reckoned, for it was a good ten minutes before he made his appearance, and as the moments passed away without the Mexican "showing up," the sport felt pretty certain that the fellow was trying to get a chance to attack him unawares, and so he kept good watch in all directions.

And it was well for the sport that he did so, for this was the exact game that the Mexican attempted to play as soon as he released himself.

He had no intention of meeting his man in a fair and open fight if he could assail him unawares.

It had only taken the fellow a couple of minutes to free himself, and then, drawing his revolver, he had advanced, taking advantage of every bit of "cover" in the way to conceal his person.

A red Indian creeping in upon his foe could not have moved with more caution.

It was a clever piece of "stalking," but thanks to the precautions adopted by the sport, the Mexican only had his labor for his pains.

Great was the disgust of the desperado when, after all his trouble—at the last moments worming himself along like a snake, crawling on the ground—he came in sight of the man he sought, and made the discovery that, thanks to Dick Talbot's foresight, there was no chance to surprise him.

For a few moments the Mexican relieved his mind by heartily cursing the man who had proved too cunning for him.

Carefully the desperado examined the lay of the ground, having the thought in his mind that in some other direction he might be able to get at his foe.

It did not take him long, though, to come to the conclusion that it could not be done.

"I shall have to give him a chance for his life, then," the Mexican muttered. "But I did not want to do it. I wanted to shoot him down like a dog, and then be able to taunt him. *Caramba!* I am thirsty for his blood!"

The fellow remained in his ambush for a few minutes, thinking that the sport might grow tired of waiting and come toward him.

But when he saw that Talbot moved not—the sport had seated himself on a rock which cropped out of the earth by the side of the trail, keeping diligent watch in all directions—he came to the conclusion that the only way he could secure vengeance was by a direct and open attack.

So he retreated a few paces until he got behind a clump of pines which afforded him an opportunity to rise and make his advance as though he had come straight down the trail.

He hated to allow the North American the satisfaction of knowing that he had attempted foul play and had not been able to work the trick.

Along the trail then he swaggered, swinging his revolver in his hand, and halted on the edge of the open space.

"Now, then, you dog of an American, I am ready for you!" he cried.

The Mexicans as a race are decidedly inclined to be theatrical.

Dick Talbot rose to his feet.

"All right; proceed to business as soon as you like."

"I suppose you understand that I intend to kill you?" the Mexican declared, with a melodramatic flourish of his revolver.

"And I suppose you understand that I do not intend to allow you to do anything of the kind, if I have any say in the matter," the sport replied.

"I am a gentleman, and you have treated me in such a manner that your heart's blood alone can atone for the wrong!" the desperado declared, more theatrically than ever.

"Don't waste your breath!" Dick Talbot exclaimed, with a touch of impatience. "Come up to the scratch and let me put you in a condition for planting!"

"Do you know who I am?" the Mexican asked, abruptly.

"Well, in my opinion you are as big a scoundrel as I have run across for some time," was Talbot's reply.

The Mexican scowled fearfully at the unexpected and decidedly uncomplimentary words; then he blurted out:

"I am Red Jack, the terror of the border!"

And as he spoke, with his left hand he plucked off his hat, and the wig and false beard which he wore, revealing the fact that his own hair and whiskers were red.

"Oho! this is a piece of luck!" Dick Talbot exclaimed, much to the amazement of the other.

"What do you mean?" cried the Mexican.

"Didn't you tell me a while ago that there was a large reward offered for Red Jack, dead or alive?"

"Yes, that is the truth. For the last ten years I have given the officers of both Arizona and Mexico more trouble than any man who

has levied toll during that time along the border!" the fellow announced, boastfully.

"Is there a reward offered for you by both the Arizonian and Mexican officials?"

"There is—but what is that to you?" the dull-witted fellow asked.

"Well, I reckon there is a good chance for me to get the rewards, and the money will come in right handy," Talbot remarked. "Now that I know who you are, I shall not be inclined to have any mercy on you, for I have no doubt that you are a bloodthirsty scoundrel and richly deserve to die. Probably you have killed many an unoffending man in your time."

"I have killed more men than I have fingers and toes," the miscreant boasted.

"It is about time then that an extinguisher was put on you, and I reckon I am the man who can do it! Come on, for I am anxious to get a chance to claim those rewards!"

The sport had heard of Red Jack before, and knew that the fellow was speaking the truth when he said that a price had been set on his head both in Arizona and Mexico; his capture, or death, would be worth a couple of thousand dollars to any man who could do the trick.

"All you will get is a place on this prairie for your bones to bleach after the wolves and the vultures have torn the flesh from them!" the Mexican cried, and then with a rapid movement he leveled his revolver and fired.

It takes an extremely good shot to hit a man with a revolver-bullet at over a hundred feet by the uncertain light of the moon, and although the Mexican was no novice in the art of marksmanship, yet he was not a champion of champions, and he knew it, although he thought he was a better shot than he really was, a common error by the way, for the average man usually overrates himself in all lines.

And the desperado, though he took careful aim, had little idea that he would hit his man; his shot was fired for the purpose of "rattling" his opponent, then, during his advance, he hoped to be able to inflict a fatal wound.

The ruffian was surprised, therefore, to see Talbot clap his left hand to his side, stagger back and sit down upon the rock from which he had arisen.

A yell came from the lips of Red Jack—he had winged his man.

He was now within sixty feet; he halted and took deliberate aim; his intention being to finish his foe.

But the shot was never fired, for no sooner had he halted, thus affording an excellent mark, than, with wonderful swiftness, up came Talbot's arm and he made one of the celebrated snap-shots for which he was noted.

He had played 'possum.

And a marksman of his expertness could not have missed his man at such a distance.

The Mexican threw up his hands, gave vent to a hollow groan, and then down he went, all in a heap.

The fight was ended.

Dick Talbot had saved the hangman a job, and the border was rid of as great a desperado as had ever preyed upon honest men.

"Two thousand dollars—quite a windfall!" Talbot remarked as he drew near and surveyed the dead ruffian. "That will keep our army in the field for twenty days. It seems to me that by this stroke of fortune I have made a good beginning."

CHAPTER XXXVII.

AGAIN IN APACHE-LAND.

THE adventurer, after ascertaining that the man was really dead, although he felt sure in regard to that point the moment the shot was fired, for it would be almost a miracle for him to miss hitting a foe exactly where he desired at such a short distance, proceeded to examine his person.

A doubt had come into Dick Talbot's mind as to whether the fellow was the man whose name he had given or not, although from his red hair and beard it seemed probable enough.

On his person, though, were letters from members of his band, in which various marauding expeditions were freely spoken of, so that there seemed no doubt that the man was the notorious outlaw.

Dick Talbot then proceeded to conceal the body in a clump of bushes away from the trail, so that it might not be discovered by any chance passer-by, who, if of a dishonest nature, might be tempted to claim that it was he who had slain the ruffian.

Then the sport made his way back to Phoenix in haste.

He summoned the landlord, and told what had happened. The marshal of the town was hunted up, and when the official learned that the stranger claimed to have killed Red Jack, he immediately summoned a posse, and Talbot conducted them to the spot where he had placed the body.

The marshal identified the remains the moment he set eyes on them.

"This hyer is the man, sure enough, an', stranger, this hyer business will be worth two thousand ducats to you, an' that is w'ot I call a

bit of luck! I hev been enter the cuss for nigh onto two years, but was never able for to put salt onto his tail."

Dick Talbot secured the necessary documentary proofs to enable him to collect the reward, and then set out to claim the money.

In the wild West, there is usually a go-ahead way of doing business, and the sport was not obliged to go through one-tenth of the red-tape formalities which would have been necessary under similar circumstances in the East.

He got the rewards both from the American and the Mexican authorities, and then proceeded to his ranch.

Mrs. Talbot, the 'Frisco Nell of other days, as the readers of the tale entitled, "Talbot the Ranch King," will remember, greeted her husband warmly, and to her he related the adventures through which he had passed.

Dick Talbot was of a roving disposition, as the readers who have followed his career well understand, and it did not seem possible for him to settle down quietly and remain so for any length of time.

Many wives would have been made miserable by such a husband, for it is woman's nature to want the man she loves ever by her side, and this fault in Dick Talbot's character would, in the opinion of such women, outweigh a thousand virtues.

But 'Frisco Nell was no such woman. She was satisfied to take Dick Talbot as he was, and did not attempt to change him.

As she frankly said:

"If I can't have you with me but one month out of the twelve, I would prefer you for the one month to any man I ever saw for the twelve."

"When you feel as if you wanted to go away, go, and when the demon of unrest is satisfied, come back. I am not afraid to trust you anywhere, nor with anybody."

With such a wife, any husband could afford to be frank.

To her Talbot confided that he suspected the supposed youth, Alva, was a woman the moment he saw her, although the disguise was so perfect that it deceived most excellent judges.

And so he became interested in the couple and joined them in their expedition.

Mrs. Talbot felt a genuine interest in the girl, and a decided hatred for the panther-like Apache queen.

"By all means organize this expedition which you have in view!" she exclaimed. "These merciless red-skins deserve a lesson, and you ought to be able to give it to them. Then, too, if you succeed in discovering the hiding-place of the nuggets, you will be able to place the unfortunate girl so that she will be independent of the world. And if you don't succeed, and she needs a home, bring her here and I will be as a sister to her."

Thus encouraged, the adventurer set out to prepare for the expedition.

Mud Turtle, the Indian, and Dandy Jim, the Man-from-Red-Dog, were on the ranch, and in addition there were five good men.

Then from the neighboring ranches Talbot procured ten more men, some of whom had been with him in his expedition which resulted in the dispersion of the Mexican brigands, as the readers of the "Ranch King" will remember.

So that, when Talbot set out for the North, he had seventeen men at his back, and all he wanted was seven or eight men more.

When the party arrived in the neighborhood of Phoenix, the sport dispatched Dandy Jim and a couple of the men from his own ranch, whom he knew he could rely upon, to the town with instructions to secure men, arms and supplies, which were to be forwarded to the ranch already selected as headquarters, to which he himself proceeded with the rest of the men.

The recruiters were instructed to use care to keep the matter quiet.

The tasks were performed with exceeding skill within two days.

Eight excellent men were secured, and they were sent off one by one to the lone ranch, the supplies followed, and the affair was managed so carefully that the gossips of the town never suspected that any big expedition was on foot.

Promptly on the next morning after the supplies arrived the party set out, going directly eastward, following the course of the Salt River, until the foot-hills of the Mazatzal Mountain Range were passed, and then the line of march was turned directly to the north, the party heading for the Colorado plateau and the Mogollon Mountains.

The expedition pushed rapidly on without any particular caution until the borders of Apache-Land were reached, and then all possible precautions were adopted.

By day the party rested, concealing themselves in some well-wooded spot, and then, when the shades of night covered the earth, they pushed on.

The moon was slowly approaching its best now, so the adventurers had ample light.

As nearly as he could strike it, Talbot followed the same route which the old mountain-man had taken, and so well did his woodcraft aid him that on the morning of the third day after entering the Indian country, the party came to

the very same glade where the three had made their camp and had been captured by the savages.

"Now, then, if the Indians have not all deserted this neighborhood, we should see something of them to-morrow, for by this time some of the bucks ought to have discovered our trail," Dick Talbot remarked, as the party prepared to make themselves comfortable for the day.

Of course, with so large a party there was no possibility that their trail could be hidden from the gaze of the keen-eyed savages if any of them chanced to come across it, but in order to prevent the red-skins from discovering how many men there were in the party, the adventurers adopted the old Indian device of treading in each other's footsteps as much as possible, so that while it was apparent that there were more than three or four in the party, it was impossible for the keenest eyed tracker to say exactly how many of the intruders there were.

The spot where the party rested was an excellent one for defensive purposes, and although it had been altogether too large for the three to attempt to hold against a savage attack, yet with twenty-seven in the grove the case was entirely different.

And now an explanation came of something which had puzzled the adventurers mightily.

Among the supplies were a few hundred feet of barbed-wire which Talbot had bought and cut up in lengths, so as to divide the transportation among his men.

With this wire he fenced in the grove, stapling the wire to the inner row of trees three strands high, with four openings at the cardinal points of the compass.

When it came to a charge and the reds attempted to overwhelm the whites by the weight of superior numbers, the barbed-wire would prove a serious obstacle, and while the half-naked Indians were surmounting it the defenders of the grove would be able to do terrible execution upon them at short-range.

By Talbot's advice the party proceeded to get to sleep, sentinels being posted.

"Unless I miss my guess, we will have the Apaches after us before the sun reaches its meridian," he remarked.

Four kept watch, and Dick Talbot and Alva also remained awake.

Earnestly they watched the sky for the smoke signals of the red-skins.

They were not kept waiting long.

Within an hour after day had fairly dawned the smoke-rings began to rise on the air, but this time there were not so many of them as before, only three being visible.

"I take it that that is a good sign," Talbot remarked. "Some of the bands are absent. The reds will be after us sooner than I expected, and we had better get a little rest."

And then the two laid down and soon slept as calmly as though there were no red-skins within a hundred miles.

At ten o'clock to the minute the sentinel to the south discovered the advancing Indians.

Alarm was at once given, and soon all the adventurers were on the alert.

Within ten minutes from the time that the warning was given, three bands of Indians had appeared, and the grove which sheltered the white men was completely surrounded by a line of dusky-hued warriors.

By Dick Talbot's count there were some two hundred warriors in the valley.

"Quite enough to make it interesting," he remarked.

CHAPTER XXXVIII. THE TALK.

THE Apaches formed a complete circle around the grove, taking care, however, to keep out of rifle-range.

Down the valley, to the south, the largest number of the red-skins were congregated, and Talbot and Alva soon recognized in the group the massive figure of Serape Colorado.

"There is the red brute himself," the sport remarked. "I am glad of it for I want to get a chance at him. It is about time that he was called to an account for the many crimes which he has committed."

"Yes, but it is the one who murdered my father that I seek!" Alva exclaimed, a bright spot burning in the dark cheeks.

"You are going to get the chance you wish," Talbot remarked after taking another look at the red-skins.

"Unless I am mistaken that boyish-looking warrior by Serape Colorado's side is the Apache princess."

Alva looked eagerly in the direction indicated, and a fierce light shone in her eyes as she gazed upon the slenderly-built brave, gay in the war-paint and all the gaudy trappings so dear to the heart of the savage.

"It is the one who with assassin bullet struck down my father!" the disguised girl exclaimed in deep accents. "Heaven has surely ordained that this human tiger should be in the war-party so that I may have a chance to avenge as foul a crime as was ever committed even in this land of blood."

"The red bucks are holding a confab," Dick Talbot remarked, watching the movements of

the Apaches with his eagle-like eyes. "I should not be surprised if they sent in a flag of truce in a few moments. That is usually the Indian way of doing business. They think they have us in a trap, and they will reckon they can talk us into surrendering without a fight. The red bucks never risk their precious persons if they can help it. If they charge us it is certain that we will make some of them bite the dust, but if they can talk us into yielding, they will be able to enjoy the fun of putting us to the torture without having to pay for it."

The assumption of the sport was correct. After the Apaches had got into position, and jabbered away among themselves for about ten minutes, one of the warriors rode out from the group—all the Indians were mounted on their hardy little ponies—and advanced slowly toward the grove.

"It is old red chief in person, Serape Colorado!" Talbot announced.

This was true.

The red king had a wily tongue, and fancied he could show the white intruders the folly of attempting to offer resistance to the dusky warriors.

As soon as he got well out from the Indian line, he gave the savage peace signal—extending his hands at right angles with his body, showing the open palms.

"He is after a talk as I reckoned," Talbot remarked. "Lie down, boys, and keep yourselves concealed, so that this red buck will not be able to discover how many there are of us, for he has eyes like a hawk, and it is our game to give him a little surprise party."

"I will advance and see what he wants; keep a close watch on all sides so as to see that the reds do not creep in any nearer, and if they do advance, the moment they come within rifle-range let the man who notices them step out and warn them back with his gun, and if they don't come to an immediate halt upon receiving the signal, fire upon them."

"And I will cover this red butcher with my rifle," Alva remarked. "Upon the first sign of treachery I will drive a bullet through his heart."

"I reckon when he sees who he has to deal with, though, that he will not be apt to try any gun-game," Dick Talbot remarked.

And then he stepped forth from the grove and advanced to meet the chief.

Serape Colorado was decidedly astonished when he recognized the sport, for he was about the last man whom he expected to meet.

He was extremely well pleased, too, for there was not a white man on earth whom he could have been more delighted to see.

He fancied, naturally, that the pale-face was again in his power, for the thought that the handful of white men might succeed in beating off his overwhelming force of warriors was one that never entered his head.

The chief came to a halt when he had covered half the distance which intervened between the Indian braves and the grove, and as Dick Talbot came up, he greeted him with a friendly grin.

"How?" exclaimed the red chief. "I am surprised to see my white brother again so soon in the Apache-Land."

"You treated me so well before, you know, that I had to come again," Talbot replied, "By the way, chief, is it understood among your warriors that they are not to attempt to advance while this talk between us is going on?" the sport asked, abruptly.

"Did I not make the sign of peace?" the old warrior demanded, with great dignity.

"Oh, I do not doubt that it is all right as far as you are concerned, but some of your young men may think to play sharp, and I want you to understand that my party are on the alert, and if any of your braves try to advance while we are talking, they will get plugged so quick that they will not be apt to know what hurt them."

This plain speech both astonished and angered the red chief.

"Is the white man a fool that he does not know that he is here helpless in the power of the red-men?" the Apache leader cried, arrogantly.

"Oh, no, not in your power yet!" Dick Talbot retorted. "We hold a strong position, and are well-armed. Whether we can succeed in whipping you, if it comes to a fight, is another question; but it is certain that we are not whipped yet. I only want to give you fair warning, for if your braves try to advance while we are talking it will bring on a fight, and then the quickest man of us two to get out his weapon will probably settle the other."

A peculiar look appeared on the grim face of the chief as Talbot finished his speech.

Of all the men with whom the red chief had come in contact since he had first donned the war-paint, the sport was about the last whom he would select for an opponent.

Not because the Apache chieftain was not a brave man, for he was, and had amply proved it in many a bloody fight, but he felt convinced that Talbot was his master, and he had no desire to try conclusions with him.

So the sport's words made him uneasy, for he

knew full well that the moment the Apaches fancied that the white men were thrown off their guard by the conversation they would begin to advance.

Their ponies would be allowed to crop the grass, apparently without the riders taking any note of what the steeds were doing, but every foot that the ponies moved would carry them just so much nearer to the grove where the white men were.

Serape Colorado saw that the other was in earnest, and that the old trick could not be worked upon him.

"You are right—some of my young men may be rash. I will caution them," he said, and then, turning in the saddle, he made some peculiar signs with his hands to his braves.

The red-skins hesitated for a moment before they replied. Then Serape Colorado made more signs, this time in an extremely forcible manner, and then, starting from the group from which the old chief had ridden, the signs went all around the savage line.

"There, they understand now that they must not advance, and we can speak freely," the old chief remarked.

"That is the way it should be; and now what do you want?"

Serape Colorado appeared surprised at the abrupt question.

"It is not a question of what do we want, but what do you want?" the savage exclaimed, haughtily. "After your recent experience I should have thought that you were about the last man in the world to dare to invade the land of the red-man!"

"There's a good deal of the bulldog in my nature," Dick Talbot replied. "When I set out to do a thing I hate to give it up until I succeed."

"Did you think you could go through the Apache-Land without the red-man getting on your trail?" the chief demanded, scornfully.

"Oh, no, I reckoned some of your braves would be apt to smell us out," Talbot replied, carelessly.

The Apache chieftain surveyed the other for a moment; he was puzzled by the unconcern displayed.

"Are you anxious then to die that you dare to brave the wrath of the red-men?"

"No, I am not ready to yield up my scalp yet awhile."

"Ah!" and Serape Colorado drew a long breath as a new idea came to him, "do you come then to join the red braves—to take Chico Colorado for your squaw?"

"Not by a jugful!" the sport replied, emphatically. "Why, chief, I wouldn't marry your tiger-cat of a daughter if there wasn't another woman in all the wide world!"

"It is the only way to save your scalp from drying by the lodge-fire of an Apache warrior!" the old chief declared with a scowl.

"You must get the scalp first," Talbot retorted.

"We will soon have that. Are you mad to think you can beat off such a force as this?" and the Apache chieftain waved his hand toward the Indian line.

"We are going to make a try for it, anyhow!"

"You will not yield then?"

"No, if we must die we might as well perish like men with weapons in our hands, selling our lives as dearly as possible."

"Surrender and mebbe we will give you a chance for your lives!" the old warrior remarked.

"Oh, no; we are not to be fooled by promises. Draw off your men, go on your way and we will go ours."

"You miserable white-skins, we will tear the hearts from your bodies and feed our dogs with them!" Serape Colorado cried in a rage, and then he turned his pony around and galloped back to his men.

CHAPTER XXXIX. A BLOODY LESSON.

THE Apaches had been awaiting the end of the talk with great impatience.

Being satisfied that the white intruders were completely in their power they were eager to make an end of them.

If they would surrender, why it would save trouble, but if they did not, it was the opinion of the red warriors that one rush would speedily end the matter, for that the pale-faces would be able to offer successful resistance was a thought that never entered the minds of the red warriors.

As well as they could make out from the trail there were eight or ten men in the party, a mere handful, of course, when compared to the two hundred odd warriors who surrounded the grove.

It was to be presumed that some men would be lost in the attack, but the red American Indian is like the Arab of the desert, with whom he has so many traits in common that it seems likely that the two races are descended from a common stock; it is their creed that the warrior who dies in battle goes straight to heaven, and so death on the hostile field has no terror for their souls.

Great was the exultation then, though not openly expressed, so accustomed are the red-men to concealing their emotions, when Serape Colorado rejoined his warriors and gave the signal for the attack to begin, and immediately the red line began to advance, closing around the grove like a huge, red serpent who intended to crush the life out of his victims with his coils.

And, on the other hand, Dick Talbot warned his men to prepare for action as soon as he gained the grove.

"Keep your eyes on them, and begin to pick them off with your rifles as soon as they get within range; don't all fire together, you know, but just as soon as a man gets a bead on a red, drive at him; use your rifles until they come to close quarters and then give them the contents of your revolvers when they charge the fence. If they don't get rattled by the rifle fire and attempt to break into the grove, we ought to be able to lay out two-thirds of the band; then, if they don't break and run after such a reception, they will be gamer than any men I have ever run across," Dick Talbot remarked.

On came the Apaches, a brilliant sight these gayly painted, fancifully-attired warriors, all superb horsemen, and moving forward with the confidence of veteran soldiers.

The savages were well-armed, all of them carrying rifles, and many of them possessing a revolver or two in addition.

The days of the rude Indian weapons, bows and arrows and lances, have long since passed away.

But though the red-skins, as far as arms went, would compare favorably with the United States soldiers, yet their weapons were far inferior to those with which Talbot's men were armed, for every man in the adventurer's outfit was provided with a repeating-rifle of the latest pattern, also a pair of revolvers, so that the small force of white men could fire more shots than their red foes, although they were outnumbered nearly eight to one.

On came the red circle at a slow trot, every man as mute as a statue, until Serape Colorado judged that he was well within range; then, rising in his stirrups—the old warrior was riding on a handsome Mexican saddle which he had "lifted" years before in a raid in Sonora—he brandished his rifle in the air and shouted his war cry.

The yell was repeated all along the line, the trot was changed into a quick canter, and the red-skins charged onward, howling like demons and blazing away with their rifles as they advanced.

Little bursts of flame came from the grove too as the whites, sheltered behind the trees, picked off their men in sharp-shooter style.

The Apaches were about a thousand yards away when they opened fire, and it did not take their tough little ponies long to reduce the distance down to a thousand feet.

With the regularity of veteran marksmen, firing at a target, the adventurers discharged their pieces, and as they were all excellent men at this kind of work, few of the bullets were wasted.

If the brave was missed, the pony was hit, and by the time the Apaches got within a thousand feet of the grove, fully a hundred Indians were either killed, wounded or dismounted, but the fierce advance was not checked in the least.

Serape Colorado and his daughter, Chico, who, garbed like a warrior, was fighting as fiercely as any brave in the band, seemed to bear charmed lives, for, though many a bullet had been fired at the pair, yet none of them had done any material damage.

The slaughter of their comrades only served to enrage the red-skins instead of inspiring them with terror.

Of course there was not a man in the dusky host who had any idea of the number of men hidden within the grove: ten at the outside was all they believed there were, and although the steadiness of the fire was a surprise to them, and under other circumstances might have excited their suspicions, yet in the excitement of the charge they had no time to think about the matter.

There were less than a hundred of the red-skins in the action when they arrived within a hundred feet of the grove; then they swung themselves from the backs of their ponies and charged on foot toward the grove, yelling like demons.

The fire of the whites began to slacken.

The Apaches were quick to notice this, and the fact gave them fresh courage. They fancied that the intruders had either been slain by their bullets or else their ammunition had given out.

But a terrible surprise was in store for them.

They came within fifty feet of the grove, yet were not able to distinguish any forms within it; the fire of the whites had entirely ceased; a yell of triumph arose on the air from the throats of the red chiefs.

Hardly, though, had it pealed fully forth, when a sheet of flame seemed to burst from the grove, followed by the sharp crack of the revolvers.

The red-skins were within thirty feet of the grove, all huddled together, and the execution done by the fire was tremendous.

The Apaches were literally mowed down.

Talbot had caused all his men to lie down, so that they could escape the bullets of the attackers, and were enabled to pour a volley into the red-skins from their revolvers at point-blank range.

Infuriated by their loss, the red braves charged the grove like so many demons, encouraged to continue the attack, notwithstanding their fearful loss, by their blunder in regard to the number of the white men.

Some sixty of the Apaches gained the timber, only to become entangled in the barbed wire, which they could not surmount, and at this point there was another fearful slaughter.

Fully one-half of the attackers were slain, for the whites were within five feet of them, shielded by the trees, and fired their pistols right in their faces.

Serape Colorado went down under the awful fire, as also did the Apache wild-cat, his daughter; and the Apaches, panic-stricken, broke and ran.

The fight was ended, and the power of Serape Colorado's band broken forever.

The victors came forth and surveyed the field.

Thanks to the precautions taken by the whites, not a man of them had been killed, although half-a-dozen had been wounded more or less severely.

Among the wounded was the disguised girl.

"It is a mere nothing—a scratch only," she said, in reply to Talbot's question when he noticed that her hunting-shirt was stained with blood.

"But where is this human fiend—this Chico Colorado?" she asked. "I fired six shots at her, and I am sure the last did not miss, for I saw her stagger, then Serape caught her in his arms and carried her away, although he was so badly wounded that he could hardly keep his feet."

Just without the timber they found the two, the old chief sitting on the ground with the girl on his lap.

It was evident that she was dying, but she was conscious of what was going on around her, for she glared with eyes full of hatred at the disguised girl.

"It was my bullet which laid you low!" Alva cried. "You killed my father, but I have avenged him."

"I spit upon you!" the Apache princess gasped, and then her soul took flight.

The old chief shook his head mournfully.

"Her medicine was good, but yours, white chief, is better," Serape Colorado remarked.

Never in all the annals of the West had the red-skins suffered a more fearful defeat.

Satisfied that they would not be troubled by any more Indians for a while after this bloody lesson, the adventurers prepared to push on in search of the nuggets, but before they had proceeded far, Alva's wound grew so painful that she was unable to proceed. Talbot made an examination and determined to give up the expedition, for he feared the worst.

Alva argued against it, but the sport was firm; a litter was constructed and the return trail taken up.

The girl grew worse and worse, and on the night that the party struck the Salt River, after midnight, as Talbot sat watching by her side, she roused suddenly.

"Put your arms around my neck and kiss me good-by," she said. "I am going home. I am content to die, for I love you, yet you cannot be mine, and life without your love is worthless."

And then, with Dick Talbot's kiss upon her lips, she yielded up her young life.

"It is my fate to be fatal to most of the women who love me," he muttered. "Few escape the deadly spell, and yet, Heaven knows, I would give my life to save any one of them."

Our tale is told.

The nuggets were never found; another mystery buried in the heart of the wild West.

THE END.

Dick Darling,

THE PONY-EXPRESS RIDER.

CHAPTER I.

"MARSE DICK, I tells you dat dis yer' won't do. Hyar we is all alone in the perarer; and ef dem painted debbles comes arter us, whar is we? Why, nowhar."

And Tom Nelson rolled the whites of his eyes in all directions, as if he expected to see the prairie alive with enemies.

Dick Darling laughed. He was a young fellow between twenty and thirty years of age, and he had known and escaped so many dangers that he had become somewhat reckless. Dick had been one of the first, in fact the very first man that ever rode on the Overland Pony Express, years before the Pacific Railroad was thought of. In those early days he had traversed mountain and plain so often, with packages worth millions, with no defense save his own arms, that he had grown to think that he possessed a charmed life. He was now traveling on the borders of Oregon, looking for a location to settle on, within a few miles of the Klamath and Modoc reservations, and with a secret object in his mind, which will develop itself in due time.

"Never mind, Tom," he said, carelessly. "The Indians round here are all quiet on their reservations, and I wouldn't care if we were to meet a whole tribe. If they come after us, we can run. If we want to find them, we always have Hector, and he's a better trailer than any brave on the plains."

"Yas, Marse Dick," said the negro, dubiously; "but how is I to run wid dis ole mule? He's jes' as slow as he can be, and Hector—"

The conference was broken off by a low, uneasy whine from a large bound which was loping along close to the riders.

"Dar, didn't I tole you so, Marse Dick? Tom's a gone nigger dis bressed day. Dem's Injuns! I knows Hector's ways like a book."

Dick Darling swung his rifle round from his back and caught it under his right arm before he answered. Then he quietly observed:

"You're right, Tom; they're Indians. Turn your mule and ride slowly toward Fairfield's ranche. I'll take care of you. Tell Miss Charlotte—I mean, tell the Fairfields that I shall be there by sunset unless I lose my hair which I don't think likely. Don't hurry, for they can't catch you. Keep a steady trot and you'll tire the ponies out, if you have a good start."

He had hardly finished speaking when over a swell of the prairie rode a plumed Indian, in full war costume, followed by at least a dozen warriors. As soon as the latter saw the two riders they halted, and took a long, silent stare. For the first time Dick Darling locked grave; his keen and practiced eyes recognized them as Modoc braves; and in spite of rumors of peace, they were all in their war-paint.

"Away, Tom, and God speed you," was the young man's exhortation. Then setting spurs to his horse, he galloped straight toward the war-party, while the negro, his face turning a dirty gray with fear, and his eyes rolling wildly, trotted away to the southwest.

The ducky was by no means a novice in prairie lore. With a good horse under him and a rifle, he would not have hesitated to face the same enemy that his race so heartily detests. As it was, he had fallen in with his old friend Marse Dick when he was wandering about the settled portions of California, totally unarmed, and mounted on an old mule on which he had been peddling tinware to the farmers.

Now Tom rode off steadily to the southwest and speedily reached a swell of land which would hide him from the pursuit of those "painted debbles," as he called them. Just as he crossed the swell he heard a rifle-shot and he looked back.

Dick Darling, one against a dozen, was galloping off at a right-angle to his own course, pursued by all the Modocs, with loud yells.

"Didn't I tole you so, Marse Dick?" muttered the ducky, regretfully, as he plunged into the next bottom. "I'se gwine to Fairfield's to guv you' message, but, gorrarnighty, 'tain't no use talking. Dem'll nebbbersee you agen, nobow. You is smart, but Cappen Jack is smarter."

The negro pursued his way with caution and experience, keeping between the swells, followed by the dog, and never exposing his person at the top of any eminence however slight.

Tom pursued his way in peace; and about four in the afternoon uttered a cry of joy. Fairfield's ranche, a small, neat dwelling in the midst of a stockade of great strength, stood before him, as he turned the corner of a swell of land. The happy ducky pounded vigorously at the sides of his mule, and succeeded in persuading the animal into a lumbering gallop, at which pace he clattered up to the gate of the stockade, yelling:

"Marse Fairfield, save yourself. De Injuns is up, and dem's done gone scalp Marse Dick Darling, and he sends de news dat he comin' hyar at sunset if he hab any ha'r left. Oh, gorrarnighty, ain't we jist had de big fight wid dem Modocs!"

He had hardly ended his speech when the face of a beautiful girl appeared at the wicket of the stockade, and a sweet voice said:

"Dick Darling scalped? I'll never believe that till I see his body. Why, I'd trust Dick to whip a whole war-party. You're afraid, that's all that ails you. Come in and see if you can tell a straight story."

And the gate flew open, revealing a tall, magnificently-formed girl, who beckoned the negro in, as if she had been used to war all her life.

Somewhat abashed, Tom dismounted and entered, muttering:

"Dar ar' Missy Charlotte, Marse Dick's gal. Ain't she lubly, jist?"

A few minutes later the ducky was in the stockade with his mule and dog, while old Fairfield, with his two beautiful daughters, Charlotte and Sophy, cross-questioned him strictly on the events of the morning.

When he had finished, all looked grave except Charlotte, who said, firmly:

"He promised to come here this evening, and come he will. I know Dick."

In the hot noon of the prairies, a young man, with a Spencer rifle in his hand, was riding leisurely toward Fairfield's ranche, followed by five Indians. Every now and then one of them fired a shot; but it seemed indeed as if Dick Darling bore a charmed life. Not a bullet struck him for some time, and he rode on as if disdaining to reply. The Modocs seemed to be afraid to close with him, as well they might. Seven of their war-party had already bitten the dust, killed by Dick.

At last the chief took a long and steady aim, halting his horse to fire, and to his great joy the quondam express-rider dropped from his saddle to the ground.

With loud yells of triumph the Indians galloped up, only to meet a terrible transformation. Leaping to his feet, unhurt, Dick leveled his repeater across his horse's back, and fired five shots in rapid succession. Three Indians fell, and the remaining couple, thoroughly demoralized, fled in confusion. The daring hunter uttered a triumphant laugh and remounted his horse. He panted a little and pressed his hand to his side as if in pain, but that was all the token that the bullet had hurt him.

"By Jove!" he soliloquized, as he rode toward Fairfield's ranche, "that little investment of mine has been well worth the thousand dollars it cost me. But that last bullet tried the mail. It was a fair knock-down."

The secret of his invulnerability among the Indians was very simple. Dick wore a shirt of mail, light and flexible, but perfectly bullet-proof. It had cost him a thousand dollars, but it was well worth the money, as long as he kept the secret to himself.

Just about sunset, Darling rode leisurely up to Fairfield's ranche gate, and the first face he saw was that of Charlotte Fairfield.

"I knew the Modocs could never kill my Dick," was all she said.

And thus began the Modoc war.

CHAPTER II.

THE Modocs were up, and all Northern California was in a fever of excitement. Volunteers were hurrying to Yreka in hot haste; the troops were being concentrated around the celebrated retreats, known as the "Lava Beds;" scouts were galloping to and fro in the country, and every one was anxious and disquieted about the prospects of a general Indian war.

In the midst of all these difficulties came another, as great as any. Besides the insurrection of the Modocs, it was certain that their next neighbors, the Klamaths, were unruly and disposed to give trouble. Two mail-carriers, in succession, disappeared; and it became necessary to find a volunteer, to continue the indispensable but dangerous duty.

It was during this time of uncertainty, so well remembered by our citizens, that the good people of Yreka were surprised, one morning, to see a nattily-dressed young fellow ride

through the streets to the head-quarters of the commanding officer, and to hear that the renowned Dick Darling, the first man who ever rode a pony express, had offered to carry the mails to and from the Lava Beds, single-handed.

His offer was of course instantly accepted, and he departed immediately. Within an hour after, a second visitor disturbed the equanimity of the town. He came in the person of an innocent-looking negro, none other than our old friend, Tom Nelson, well mounted and armed, and followed by Dick Darling's splendid hound, Hector.

"Please, marse capten-colonel," said Tom, when he was introduced to the commander of the district, "I'se come to see ef I couldn't help de sogers, nohow. I'se ole hunter, I is, and I'se tuk many an Injun scalp, when I war down in Texas wid de ole Ninth cavalry. You gibbs me twenty dollar fur ebbery scalp, boss, an' I gets you a hull basket full."

"Get out of here, you black rascal," said the pompous commander, in great scorn. "Do you suppose that the United States can't take fifty red vagabonds without paying scalp bounties? Be off with you."

Tom drew himself up with native dignity, and cuttingly observed:

"Tain't b'en looking much like *takin'* dem, marse colonel, when dey kills ten sogers for one squaw. I offers my sarvices. Will you hab dem?"

"No!" thundered the commander, half angry, half amused at the ducky's offer.

Tom made a stiff salute, wheeled round and marched out, muttering:

"Needn't be so huffy, noway; don't want to steal nuffin'."

He climbed into his saddle, and rode out of the town in high dudgeon, resolved, as he expressed it, "to have a scout on his own hook, anyway."

It took but a short time for him to be clear of the town; and then, when shut out by an intervening swell, he seemed to be as much alone as if in the midst of the desert.

Tom Nelson had not obtained horse and arms, had not come all this way from Fairfield's ranche, without an object. What that object was, will be explained by a few words that fell from the lips of Charlotte Fairfield, the day before, when Dick Darling rode away to Yreka from the ranche, announcing his intention of volunteering as mail-carrier.

"Tom," she said to the negro, "there is something tells me that Dick is going to a greater peril than he has ever yet run. Are you brave?"

"Try me, missy," was the laconic reply.

"Take my horse, and one of my father's rifles, then," she said, "and follow Dick. Whatever happens to him, do you be near him; and let no harm come to him. Bring him back safe, Tom, and I'll give you free quarters in our house for life."

And Charlotte blushed, for it was currently reported that she and Dick were to be married, as soon as the latter had settled his "claim."

Tom accepted the offer with eagerness. Mounted and armed, he was a very different man from Tom on a slow mule, without a weapon. Followed by the hound Hector, which he trusted implicitly, while Darling considered the dog an incumbrance in active service, he set forth, and presented himself at Yreka, as we have seen. The fact was that Tom, while anxious to serve his patroness, was equally anxious to turn an honest penny; and he had heard from all the citizens round that a bounty was offered on Modoc scalps. His reception by Col. W—— had undeceived him, and he resolved to "stick to business, and bring back Marse Dick."

For some time Tom rode north from Yreka toward the Lava Beds in a very leisurely manner, making frequent excursions to the right and left, and hunting for Darling's trail. On the hard ground of the prairie he might never have found it, had it not been for the assistance of the hound. Hector suddenly uttered a low yelp of joy, and set off at a swinging

gallop, with his nose to the ground, following the trail which his keen scent recognized as that of his master.

"Good hound, good ole Hec!" cried Tom, delighted. "Who says dat we can't track like all creation?"

And away galloped the ducky after the dog, at a round rate of speed, the track of horses' feet appearing at intervals, the sagacious dog running steadily along, the scent "lying well," to use a phrase culled from the language of the prairie.

After nearly an hour of this sort of work, Hector made a dead stop; and appeared puzzled.

Then he ran slowly and hesitatingly along for some paces, and at last paused, threw up his head, and gave utterance to a long and mournful howl.

"Gorra mighty, wurra dat?" exclaimed Tom, as he looked down to find the cause of the dog's behavior.

To his surprise, appeared nothing singular. The hoof-tracks had vanished, or were so faint as to be scarcely discernible; yet it was evident that the hound could not have lost the scent. In fact, he had not. As if he had relieved his feelings by that howl, he set off on the track once more, and speedily put another mile between himself and Yreka.

Tom noticed, however, that he ran slowly and seemed uneasy. Every now and then he would half stop, turn his head to windward, and utter a low wail, till at last, as a puff of wind came from the north-east, Hector again stopped, threw up his head, and howled once more.

"Dat dog's got mo' sense dan half de Chris-sens," soliloquized Tom, scratching his head. "Whaf for he do dat, I'se wonnerin'."

Then, as a sudden idea struck him, he cried:

"Why, Tom Nelson, ef you isn't a foolis' nigger! You so anxious to catch Marse Dick you forget whar you is. Dem's Injuns, and de dog smell 'um. He nebber act dat way widout dey was around."

The negro halted and cogitated. Then, taking a sudden resolution, he called the dog off the track, and spoke to him.

"Find de Injuns, good Hec, find dem; and we'se spoil deir leetle game. Dey's arter Marse Dick, jess so sho' as eggs is eggs."

The hound, with wonderful sagacity, appeared to understand the reason of the change of route; for he galloped off to windward, his head well up, no longer whining or baying, but "running mute." It was plain from his actions that the Indians could not be far off. Tom brought his rifle to the front in readiness and followed at a canter. As he topped the next swell, he came in sight of a scene that repaid him for his change of course. He had, indeed, arrived in the nick of time.

Not a mile off the rugged edges of the famous Lava Beds could be seen indenting the edge of the prairie, giving but little indication of the deep chasms and caves that existed below the surface. Tom stood by the brink of a long, narrow valley; and up it was coming, slowly riding back from the Lava Beds, Dick Darling himself, returning with the led mail-pony. But not fifty feet from the negro crouched a group of five Modocs behind a rock, waiting for the unsuspecting mail-carrier. Well was it for Dick that that presentiment of danger had crossed Charlotte's mind, and induced her to dispatch Tom on his track. In a moment the ducky justified his patroness' choice. Up went his Spencer rifle to his shoulder before a Modoc had risen; and the biggest warrior fell dead.

Then there was a confused hurly-burly of shots, ending by fearless Dick coming galloping up, a revolver in each hand; and the result was summed up in the death of three Modocs, the wounding of Tom in several places, none of them deep, and the flight of the remaining pair of assassins among the cracks and fissures toward the Lava Beds, while the negro and Darling galloped safely back to camp.

Before they went, Tom religiously scalped each one of his fallen foes and then turning to

Darling, the blood streaming from his wounds, observed:

"Marse Dick, you isn't fit to take care of yourseff. You jess better done gone git married. Missy Charlotte she send me to take care of you, and by golly you needs it, for ef it hadn't been for me, you'se done gone to hebben dis day."

CHAPTER III.

"Now, Marse Dick," said Tom Nelson, as the mail-carrier and he sat at opposite sides of a little fire, in the Twelfth Infantry camp, a night or two after the murder of General Canby; "dis yer war ain't gwine to be got over so quick as dem folkses in Yreka t'inks. It's berry well fo' Ginerel Gillem to gib big order, 'sterminate ebbery cussed Modoc,' but 'tain't so easy to do the 'sterminating dem fellers, Marse Dick. Now why for should you and I be loafin' 'roun' here, when we mout be out wid Missy Charlotte at Fairfield's, whar we is allers welcome, you know, Marse Dick. De season is gwine, and de corn and taters is not in, and dough fit in's mighty pooty work fo' leetle time, it get mighty tiresome to dis nigger."

Dick Darling laughed.

"If you're tired, you can go home, Tom. For my part, I volunteered to carry the mails during this business, and I don't intend to give up, till Captain Jack and all his pals are ironed in pairs."

"But den, what Missy Charlotte do?" asked Tom, shrewdly. He knew the right road to influence Darling. The young mail-carrier's face changed.

"What of her?" he asked. "I must do my duty without regard to her, and perform my agreement with the Government."

"But Missy Charlotte she send word by me, she want see Marse Dick, berry partickler," said Tom, stoutly.

"Did she say that?" asked Dick, eagerly.

"Yes, Marse Dick," replied the darky, unblushingly; which was a tremendous lie on his part, and he knew it. But Tom was too anxious to get home, to hesitate at a falsehood, more or less, if it only secured his end.

The young mail-carrier mused a few minutes.

"Tom, I must certainly go see her," he said, in a low voice, "if I have to get leave."

"No need of dat, Marse Dick," said Tom, shrewdly. "No need let ebberybody in camp know your business. You an' me is gwine to Yreky to-morrer. Let's go roun' by Fairfield's ranche, an' pay our respec."

"A good idea, Tom. We'll do it. Time to go to sleep. Good-night."

When the first faint streaks of dawn were brightening in the east, Dick Darling and Tom Nelson were in the saddle, and riding slowly and cautiously out of the Lava Beds. So broken was the country, and so favorable for ambushes, that the young mail-carrier was compelled to take a different route every day, to escape assassination.

In the faint, dubious light, they struck down a narrow canon, which led them out on the plain in safety, just as the light became plain.

Dick Darling breathed freer when he came out on the open prairie. Bold as he was, there was something in the nature of the Modoc war, so horrible and bloodthirsty, something so gloomy and repulsive in those black Lava Beds, that it weighed upon the youth's senses like a nightmare.

"Come along, Tom," he cried, when they were at last on the prairie; "if we expect to reach Yreka by way of Fairfield's ranche, we'll have to stir round pretty lively."

And the two comrades, white and black, stretched rapidly off to the westward, in the direction of Fairfield's ranche. Not a sign of a Modoc was to be seen, and in three hours from the time they left camp, the huge live-oak that sheltered the gate of the ranche appeared in sight.

The hound Hector accompanied them; for since that faithful creature had twice saved his

master's life, by giving intelligence of approaching danger, Darling had consented to Tom's taking him along. Now, suddenly, the dog gave a furious bay, and darted forward toward the ranche at such lightning speed that he left the riders far behind.

"Marse Dick, dar's an Injun sneakin' roun' de ranche," said Tom, eagerly. "I knows dat dog's ways. Let's ride like sixty."

And away went the comrades toward the ranche at full gallop, following the dog, who ran straight as an arrow toward the great live-oak tree that grew near the ranche gate, baying loudly all the time.

Then they heard a great disturbance in the ranche, and out came old Fairfield, rifle in hand, roused by the dog. They saw him raise his rifle to his shoulder; and then, like a flash, out darted an Indian on foot from under the great tree, and ran like a deer across the prairie toward a clump of cottonwood a little way off. But that Indian was not destined to escape. The old agent leveled his rifle with a cool deliberation, and they saw a little puff of white smoke. The savage threw up his arms and fell dead with a shriek, just as the two daughters of Fairfield came running out of the gate, each bearing a rifle, in the style of true border heroines.

As the comrades galloped up, there was a scream of joyful recognition, and then Dick Darling was off his horse, and Charlotte Fairfield was in his arms. Tom Nelson rode round the ranche in company with old Fairfield to ascertain if any more Indians were concealed near by, but none were found. The old rancher returned on foot to the gate, while Tom took a wider circuit through the prairie on the look-out for sign of any kind. The slain Indian proved to be a Klamath, as they supposed, and the fact made Tom very uneasy, as it showed that the Klamaths must be growing bold from the impunity of the Modocs.

When he came back toward the tree, he felt sober and thoughtful, but the sight he beheld there was enough to cheer up a hermit in Lent. Charlotte and Dick were standing under the great live-oak with their hands clasped in each other's, while the girl appeared to be earnestly warning Dick not to expose himself to peril for her sake. But Tom started with surprise as he looked to the rear of the lovers; for there stood Sophy Fairfield, regarding them both with a gloomy, lowering brow.

Her father stood near her, watching them with grave approbation, and not seeing the expression of his youngest daughter's face. But Tom did; and the shrewd darky understood the situation at a glance.

"Golly, dat light-haired gal as jealous of de dark one as she can be," he muttered. "Dey've both been pullin' caps for Marse Dick, and de dark one's got him. Golly, but I'se glad 'tain't my gal she's a-glowerin' at. She look as if she like to pisen her."

Here Dick called to him, laughingly:

"Tom, you've been lying to me, you rascal. You said that Miss Charlotte wanted to see me—"

"An' I guess as how she did, boss," was the grinning reply; "leastwise it look uncommon like it jess now. I nebber tells no lie, Marse Dick."

"But you told me she gave you a message, and she never did."

"Well, well, Dick, we might as well forgive him," said Charlotte, smiling; "for he brought you to me when I least expected you, and brought Hector, too, the good old dog, who saved us all from being murdered perhaps, for that Indian must have been only a spy from a larger body."

"And I'se t'inkin', Missy Charlotte," said Tom, gravely, "dat we'll have to be gittin' out of dis hyar ef dem fellers is roun', or we won't git safe to Yreky. Dey won't trouble dis hyar ranche no mo', but dey'll go fur de mail-carrier whenebber dey finds him."

"You say right, Tom," said Darling, with a sigh. "We must even part, but not, thank God, for long. 'Tis true, I run a great risk, but you must remember that the pay is pre-

portionate. Once let these Modocs be crushed, and I shall come here to you, with funds sufficient to stock our farm close to your father's and then we will all be happy."

It was not, however, for some hours after that the mail-carrier and his sable assistant took their departure. Old Fairfield insisted on feeding themselves and horses before they went, and then they rode away toward Yreka, Hector galloping slowly along at their horses' heels.

Charlotte stood at the gate, watching the retreating form of the mail-carrier, her arm entwined around the waist of Sophy. The latter had her head averted, and generous Charlotte, never seeming aware of the true state of the case, was pouring into her sister's ears Dick's praises. At last, as she was lamenting the hard fate that drove him away from them so often, Sophy turned and faced her with gleaming eyes, saying:

"You are not fit to have the love of a man like Dick Darling, when you let him go to danger as if you could not help it. If he loved me, do you suppose that I would let him go as you have? No; I would cling around his neck, so that he should leave all the world to stay with me. And all the world might go to ruin outside our home, so he would stay with me."

And the jealous girl burst into a flood of tears, and flung away into the house.

And so Charlotte Fairfield woke to the consciousness that her sister loved Dick Darling.

CHAPTER IV.

THE sun was high in the heavens over Fairfield's ranche, and the air hot, sultry and dry, when a young girl came to the gate of the stockade that surrounded the house, and tripped down to the spring on the other side of the great live-oak tree near the gate.

She was a tall, magnificently-formed girl, with long black hair that fell nearly to her waist; and she carried the pitcher balanced on her head with all the upright grace of an Arab maiden.

She had been gone but a moment, when a second girl came to the gate, equally beautiful in face and form, but the brightest of blondes, as her sister Charlotte was the darkest of brunettes.

Sophy Fairfield opened the gate softly, and looked forth. Hardly had she done so when she was startled by a rustling sound in the tree overhead; and looking up, gave a low scream of surprise and terror. The next moment, down out of the branches of the tree, where he had been hidden, dropped a tall Modoc warrior; and, not noticing Sophy at the gate, rushed to the other side of the tree, where Charlotte had gone to the spring.

It was the work of a second for quick-witted Sophy, used to frontier perils, to slam to and bar the gate, and to rush to the house for a weapon. She knew, none better, that it was useless for her to venture out and add one more to the victims of Indian barbarity. At such times selfishness is the only course for a woman, and not till Sophy was safe in the house did she feel that she might do something to save her sister from a terrible fate.

It was at the beginning of that sudden Modoc outbreak which startled and alarmed the whole country. As yet the settlers in the immediate vicinity of the scene of hostilities were slow to believe themselves in any danger. Sophy's father, old John Fairfield, had been Indian agent and trader so long that he had grown to think that no Indian would harm him. That very day he had ridden fearlessly away to Yreka, leaving his ranche unguarded, save by the two girls, as he had done hundreds of times before.

Sophy Fairfield knew that she had none but herself to depend upon, and she made her preparations with all the cool courage of a border girl. The house was secured against attack in a few minutes—it was a veritable frontier fortress, easily defended—then the brave girl took down her light rifle, girt herself with

a belt containing two revolvers and ammunition, and ascended to the roof of the house to survey the neighborhood.

The summit of the little dwelling was surmounted with a small structure of heavy logs, meant on purpose for sheltering an observer, and the girl found no difficulty in surveying the whole of the horizon.

She had not far to look for her sister. The whole neighborhood of the ranche was deserted; and the presence of two or three cows, grazing outside the stockade as quietly as if nothing had happened, was conclusive proof that the Indians must have departed, as cattle are always uneasy in their vicinity. But a glance out on the prairie revealed the sought-for object.

A single horse, with a double burden, was moving rapidly off to the north-west in the direction of the Lava Beds, and Sophy recognized the figure of the Modoc warrior, while the muffled-up bundle on the horse's croup could be none other than her captured sister.

A strange thrill went through the girl's heart, as she gazed. Her thoughts may be best guessed by the murmured words that fell from her lips.

"She is gone—by no fault of mine—they can not blame me—I did not do it—but I loved Dick first, and now it will not be wrong to love him—poor Charlotte will be killed, and he will be free to love me—I know he would if she had not come between us—they can not expect me to follow her alone—and Dick Darling will be mine."

It was a terrible temptation to the poor girl. Dick Darling, the Dashing Dick, darling of all the girls in the Far West, had won two hearts where he had thought to win but one; and had fallen as a brand of discord into the Fairfield family, making rivals of sisters, who, till then, had never held more than one common thought. Only the day before he had left them, to carry the mails from Yreka to the Lava Beds, and now Sophy's rival was vanishing before her eyes, and no blame could attach to her.

The girl watched the retreating figures with dry, blazing eyes for some time, and then turned hurriedly away, murmuring:

"No, no, I can not look longer—I shall go mad."

She ran down stairs to the little sitting-room, and threw herself on a chair, burying her face in her hands and sobbing. When she looked up, a sudden change came over her face, for the first thing that her eyes rested on was a staring portrait on the wall. It was but a daub, to cultivated eyes, but to hers, accustomed to it for years, it produced a shock, such as the best efforts of a Titian could not have compassed. It was the picture of two little girls, with arms entwined, playing with some flowers, herself and sister, as they were once.

It acted on the girl like a stroke of lightning. She jumped up and ran wildly out to the stables, screaming:

"Lotty! Lotty! Dear little sister, I'll die to save you—forgive me."

In a moment more, with trembling hands, she was taking down a saddle and hastily girthing it on her own fleet Indian pony. Ere the Modoc ravisher was out of sight from the ranche, Sophy was mounted and on his trail.

The Indian who had carried off Lotty Fairfield was a tall, muscular fellow, richly dressed, but unarmed, save for a bowie-knife. He found the girl at the spring; seized her with a grasp of iron, and enveloped her in a blanket, ere she could utter more than a single shriek of terror; then dashed her to the earth with a force that half-stunned her; and in a moment had bound a rope firmly round the blanket, securing it so strongly that escape became an utter impossibility. The daring ravisher then lifted her up like a log, threw her over his shoulder, and strode away to the cottonwood thicket. Here he found a fine horse fastened to a tree, which he led out, laid the helpless bundle over the croup of the animal, mounted

himself, and then fastened the girl to his waist with a long belt.

That done, he started off at a round trot, heading straight for the Lava Beds, and for some time rode on without uttering a word. About six miles from the ranche appeared a grove of live-oak, the central one of all being as gigantic as the one that sheltered the ranche gate. To this grove the Modoc directed his course, quietly dismounted there, and fastened his horse to a tree, then laid his captive on the ground, and spoke for the first time.

"Ha, Missy Lotty, you t'ink Shasta Jim big fool, but he no fool. Me Modoc brave, and me want pretty white squaw—by gosh, me have him now. Come, give Shasta a kiss, pooty Missy Charlotte."

As the scoundrel spoke, he drew the keen bowie-knife and cut a slit in the blanket, which he threw open, disclosing the face of poor Charlotte Fairfield, gazing apprehensively up at him.

"Aha, Missy Charlotte," said Shasta Jim, triumphantly, "you know Shasta. You know Hooker Tom, kill yesserday by ole man Fairfield. Now den, you be my squaw, I call him all right. If not, I cuts you into little bits just now. Ha, s'pose you like dat? Come, you be Shasta Jim's squaw; he gib you nice lodge, good hunter, plenty buff'lo, much heap eat; s'pose you say yes."

And the savage leered lovingly at his captive, who turned her eyes away, shuddering with loathing, but not daring to speak for fear of hastening her own destruction.

Shasta Jim was about to renew his efforts at entertainment, when he suddenly started and listened. The rapid tramp of a horse at full speed was coming over the prairie. Charlotte rolled herself over, so as to see who was coming, and recognized her own sister, with a rifle gleaming in her hand.

"Saved! It is Sophy!" she murmured, and fell back, as Shasta Jim sprung to his feet, looking uneasy. The Indian, as we have seen, was unarmed except for his knife. But Shasta was too old a warrior to run from a girl, at whatever disadvantage of arms. He waited silently by his captive, whom he held up with one arm as a shield from the expected shot, and kept his knife behind him, ready for action.

Sophy Fairfield galloped up to the savage, rifle in hand, and then wheeled away, as if disappointed. Like a tiger Shasta sprung after and caught her by the flowing skirt. She screamed and dropped her rifle, and Shasta let go the skirt to pounce on the weapon.

It proved to be only a ruse of Sophy's. Even as he stooped for the rifle the girl fired her pistol into his back, grazing him, and Shasta Jim, waiting for no second shot, dropped the stolen weapon and fled.

A moment later the sisters were in each other's arms, Sophy murmuring:

"Forgive me, Lotty darling, I'll never be jealous again. Be happy with Dick."

CHAPTER V.

THE sun was sloping down toward the westward, and casting long, black shadows from the gigantic live-oaks that surrounded Fairfield's ranche, when a tall, wiry young fellow, on a bay horse, followed by a fawny bloodhound with black muzzle, rode toward the stockade gate from the direction of Yreka. Any mountain man would have recognized this rider as the well-known Dick Darling, first Pony-Express Rider on the Overland Route, and now volunteer mail-carrier between Yreka and the Lava Beds, where lurked the Modocs.

As Darling neared the ranche a pleased smile lighted up his face, and he murmured to himself:

"They do not expect me; I shall give them a surprise; but nothing to what they will have soon. My innocent little girl, how they have blinded her to the truth! But now it will not be long ere we—Holloa! what's this?"

As he spoke he reined up near the gate, and looked in surprise at the turf around the little spring under the live-oak. It was all torn up

and trampled, as if by a struggle, a broken pitcher lay beside it, and the tracks of a horse at full speed led off into the prairie in the direction of the Lava Beds.

Dick Darling cast a hurried glance at the gate. It was wide open, and his dog ran in, and was questing about the yard. Not a human being was in sight around Fairfield's. Impatient and anxious, he rode in, calling out:

"Fairfield! Lotty! Sophy! Where are you all?"

Nothing answered him but the echoes.

"By heavens!" he muttered, "there's Modoc craft in this, or I mistake. Some of Jack's band have been round here. How lucky I have Hector with me."

Then he rode hastily out of the deserted ranche, calling his dog; and soon stood by the scene of the late struggle. He spoke to the intelligent hound as if he was addressing a human being, saying:

"Hector, there's been trouble here. Someone has carried off your young mistress and her sister. Captain Fairfield's gone, and where I don't know. Find the fellow that carried off your mistress, boy. Seek him, Hector."

The great bloodhound looked up in his master's face with his head on one side, as if he understood every word. Then he turned round and bustled about over the trampled turf, snuffing and whining, till, at length, he threw up his head, and uttered a long, mournful howl of peculiar tone.

"Indians; I thought so," said Darling, nodding. Seek them, boy."

Hector waved his tail slowly back and forth, and went off on the prairie at a long, swift lope, baying in low tones as he went, while Darling rode after him, rifle in hand.

Straight away from the setting sun he rode, bending to the north-east, the direction of the dreaded Lava Beds, wherein lay concealed Captain Jack and his band of savage Modocs. It was also the only road which was as yet unoccupied by troops, the only way of exit left to the savages out of the net of danger which surrounded them. None knew better than Darling that he was going every moment deeper into peril.

But, as he rode on, watching the dog, his thoughts were only absorbed by a single thought: "What had become of his friend Fairfield and his daughters?"

After half an hour's rapid riding, a clump of huge live-oaks looming up ahead, toward which the dog was making, announced that he was running his quarry to earth in all likelihood.

The young frontiersman cocked his rifle, increased his pace to a full gallop, and struck off on a circle so as to ride around the little grove. His experience told him that it most likely contained an enemy, and he did not wish to afford a skulking Modoc a chance of a cool shot.

The hound, separated from its master, kept on as straight as a die, dashed into the covert, baying loudly; and, a few moments after, out came three people at different points, all evidently roused by the dog.

Two of them were girls, mounted on a single horse. The third was an Indian warrior, coming out of the opposite side of the grove.

With a cry of joy Darling galloped toward the Indian, just as the two girls headed their single horse for Fairfield's ranche.

In another moment the faithful Hector bounded out of the wood and sprung savagely at the Indian on the other side. Darling threw his reins over his horse's neck, and fired a rapid shot out of his Spencer rifle at the Modoc. Like a flash, the other dropped over the side of his horse, swerved, and galloped away toward the very place whence the girls had emerged, still followed by the hound.

But the borderer noticed as he passed that the Indian had no gun, and recognized him as one of the bravest of the Modocs, Shasta Jim by name.

He could hardly understand the reason of the other for following the two girls, but he dashed after him, wasting no more useless shots, but striving to close.

Shasta Jim swept on at full speed to the very place whence the girls had come out, where he suddenly stooped down to the ground, and a moment later sprung in his saddle with a yell of triumph, waving in his right hand a rifle.

Too late Darling saw the trick. The rifle had been there, lying on the ground, whoever it belonged to, and Shasta Jim had picked it up. Now it was a fair fight.

The Modoc did not continue his flight far. He only galloped out into the prairie to a sufficient distance to secure what sailors call an "offing," then turned his horse, and began to near Darling.

Both the antagonists rode at a slow canter in a spiral, gradually contracting their diameter to approach each other on the left hand, each keeping his cocked rifle at a "ready," and watching his opportunity.

Had there been no disturbing element in the contest, Darling would have fared badly; for Shasta Jim was accounted the best shot of his whole tribe.

But one antagonist was there, destined to bring the Modoc to an untimely end. It was the dog Hector, who, with almost human sagacity, now aided his master to some purpose.

White and red were within fifty paces of each other, both horses cantering smoothly and steadily, when Shasta Jim leveled his rifle. Hector, who had been galloping along by the near side of the Indian's horse, no longer giving tongue, sprung forward as the savage raised his piece. The dog uttered a startling bay, and seized Shasta by the leg. The rifle exploded harmlessly, and the bullet flew up to the sky as the Modoc, with a savage yell, turned on the dog.

In the same instant Dick Darling struck in his spurs and galloped in, delivering a single shot, when the muzzle of his piece was within three feet of Shasta's body.

With one last yell, the Modoc warrior threw up his arms and fell from his horse, as Hector let go his leg to seize him by the throat.

The riderless steed galloped away in terror, and the next moment Dick was off his horse, calling back Hector, and standing by the body of his slain enemy. Shasta Jim was quite dead.

Then the young man looked up, and beheld the two girls halted at a little distance, as if uncertain whether to stay or fly.

"Come on, young ladies," cried the young man; "the danger is past. This rascal will never insult you more."

Then, as if reassured, the two girls approached, and all was explained. Then Dick Darling learned, for the first time, that his friend Fairfield had gone out hunting that very morning; that in his absence Charlotte, the eldest sister, going to the spring for water, had been seized and carried off by Shasta Jim; that the gentle, golden-haired Sophy had turned heroine, armed herself, and gone in search of her sister, just in time to save her from the Modoc's insults; that the sudden appearance of the hound had frightened them all, so that Sophy actually dropped her rifle as she sprung to her horse; that Shasta Jim had been unarmed save for a knife, and had fled from her firearms. It thus became plain how the Indian must have been taken prisoner in some other place, from which he had escaped, unarmed, and had watched his opportunity when Sophy dropped her rifle.

Shasta's runaway horse was soon caught, and the three friends slowly rode back to Fairfield's ranche, talking over the occurrences of the day, and blessing the Providence that brought to the rescue in the right moment, Dick Darling and brave old Hector.

CHAPTER VI

THE land was quiet once more, and no longer did the settlers start in their sleep at the coyote's howl, thinking it the distant war-whoop of some scalping-party. The Modocs had surrendered at last, and Captain Jack was in irons, handcuffed to the assassin of poor Canby.

At Fairfield's ranche every thing was peaceful once more, the orange and lemon planta-

tions within the ring-fence were as trim as ever; the cattle were released from the corral, and the stockade gate was left swinging open, as in the days of peace.

Out in the garden two girls were walking, both strikingly beautiful, both in opposite styles. Their features were very similar, so alike that one could not fail to pronounce them sisters, but the coloring was essentially unlike. In the raven-black hair and sparkling dark eyes of Charlotte Fairfield, the elder, in the proud, resolute spirit that breathed from her whole face, could be read the race of her Spanish-American mother. In the wealth of flowing, golden hair that flowed over her sister's shoulders, in the large, liquid-blue eyes, with their mournful and appealing glance, the Saxon traits of her father's English ancestors were equally evident.

The sisters were both dressed in a style such as we in the East are not in the habit of associating with the supposed wilds of California, but which is an every-day matter to the wealthy farmers of the Pacific coast, where the soil brings forth riches such as our paler clime can not approach.

Charlotte's robe was dark and rich, suiting well her brunette beauty, and heavy coils of dark hair. Sophy's bright locks flowed loosely over a misty, white robe, enriched by a lace shawl of cobweb fineness. The two sisters strayed along in the garden, conversing quietly in low tones, their arms entwined around each other.

"How glad you must be, Lotty," said the younger, softly, "to think that the fighting is over at last, and your Dick safe. It seems to me that I could never be sufficiently thankful if such were my luck."

Charlotte turned and looked at her sister with a faint smile, as if half-amused, half-touched at something in the words.

"How do you know I am so lucky, Sophy?" she said. "Dick Darling is coming here, it is true, to settle close to us, and he has earned a heavy reward from the government for his services; but how do you know that I am the one to take Dick's fancy, child? He is dark, you know, and dark men generally fancy fair women."

Sophy turned her great blue eyes somewhat reproachfully on her sister, as she said, with a voice that trembled slightly:

"Lotty, this is no theme for jesting, my sister. You know—my secret—it is not kind of you to be playing with it. I would not treat you so, dear."

And she drew away her arm from her sister, as if deeply wounded. Charlotte Fairfield smiled affectionately, even while a tear was in her eye. As Sophy turned away her head, the elder sister threw both arms around her, and pressed her closely, exclaiming:

"Pardon me, pardon me, darling. We must not quarrel to-day. Why, Sophy, all the omens seem to point to your happiness to-day. See, you are dressed in white, and I in black. That scarf of lace, what is it, dear, but a bridal veil already made; and see, dear, we have stopped full in front of this orange bush in full bloom. Certainly, Sophy, all the signs say that you will be wedded first, dear."

"I don't see how or with whom," said Sophy, with a sigh.

"I'll tell you," cried Charlotte, gayly. "We will try it by divination. Do you not remember old aunt Chloe's way, with the orange and willow? See, here are both at hand, to try it with. Stay you there, stock-still, or it will break the charm."

With that she ran hastily to the orange-bush, and plucked a little spray of blossom, then broke off the end of a little branch of willow that had sprouted from the edge of the fountain hard by.

Returning to her sister, still smiling in her half-mysterious manner, she passed her arm around the other's neck, and sung in low tones:

Orange and willow we twine, we twine,
We that the Fates do be, do be;
We that the threads of life combine,
We that are sisters three, all three.

Orange and willow, on land and on billow,
Emblems of love are made, are made;
Orange-buds perfume the bride's downy pillow
Willow-wreath circles the loves that fade

Orange and willow we cast in the air,
There let them fall at our feet, our feet;
Willow for her that is lonely to wear,
Orange-bud's snow-bloom the bride to greet.

In singing the last few lines, she cast both sprays high in air, and as they fell, pointed smilingly to the earth.

The orange-blossoms had fallen at Sophy's feet, at the very feet of Sophy, who stood, half-smiling, half-superstitious, watching the progress of the simple divination.

With a gay laugh Charlotte picked up the sprays and set one in her own hair, the orange-buds on Sophy's golden crown of tresses, crying:

"There, said I not so? You will be the bride, Sophy, and I must wear the willow. Does it not become me well, child? Nay, but the white blossom is shamed by your white forehead, my sister, and my black face—"

"Hush, hush!" said Sophy, half-crying. "I can not bear it any longer, Charlotte. You are mocking poor me, when you know that Dick is coming, this very day perhaps—"

"To crave the hand of Sophy Fairfield," said a clear, manly voice, just behind them, as the tall form of the renowned scout and rider, Dick Darling, sprung from behind the thick orange-bush, where he had been concealed.

"To crave the hand of Sophy Fairfield, as he has already secured the kind consent of her sister, and her father's blessing," continued Dick, falling on one knee before the trembling girl, who, pale as death, seemed almost ready to faint. "Oh, Sophy, dearest, you can not have been blind all this time to my love for you. You must have seen that it was you that I loved, and you alone—"

But here Sophy suddenly flushed up, and snatched away from the young man the hand which he held, saying, half-chokingly:

"For shame, Mr. Darling; for shame, Lotty, to combine together to make a jest of me, who never harmed you. Love me! Why, sir, you know that all this time your attentions have been paid to my sister in a manner that none could misconstrue. It is to her that you should speak, not me."

Darling laughed, and so did Charlotte. He sprung up, and passed his arm around Sophy, in spite of her faint resistance, saying:

"Dearest Sophy, I have spoken enough with her. Indeed, she made me beg like a slave before she would give her consent to taking you away from home; and your father said that he would never give his consent till Charlotte had. She's been the cruellest creature you ever knew, Sophy. She wouldn't let me speak to you, or even look at you, till this Modoc trouble was over. She said that she would not have her sister's affections entangled with a man who might be cut to pieces at any moment. And so there was I loving you, my little dove, more than my life, yet compelled to keep away from you, and pretend to make love to her, for fear that you should be tempted to set your heart on me, and I might get killed. And now, tell me, dearest Sophy, am I mistaken that you return my love? Indeed I love you, and none but you; and Charlotte will tell you that I— Why, where is she?"

They both looked round, Sophy blushing scarlet, Darling pretending to be greatly surprised; but Charlotte had slipped off, leaving the lovers alone together, to discuss their differences.

That she had done so wisely was apparent, half an hour later, when Dick and his promised bride strolled into the house, and found it decked and in order, Charlotte in white, as a bridesmaid, her father in his best, and a grave, bearded gentleman in the uniform of a United States chaplain, waiting for them. To blushing Sophy it seemed an indecent hurry, but it became evident that the plot had been preconcerted with the others, for wedded were Dick and Sophy that very day, and there is not a finer ranche in all Northern California now than that of Mr. and Mrs. Dick Darling.

THE END.

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